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MYSTERY MAGAZINE

OCTOBER, 1965 Vol. 17, No. 5

NEW JOE RODRIGUEZ NOVELET

THE GREAT HUNTINGTON HEIST

by TOM H. MORIARTY

Art may be long and life short. But rookie plainclothesman Rodriguez found that theft and murder left a man little time to ponder the more mellow aspects of philosophy.

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THE GREAT HUNTINGTON HEIST

The Huntington art collection contained so many priceless treasures it was talked about in hushed whispers—even by thieves. But murder seldom embraces a reverence for art.

by TOM H. MORIARTY

ART WAS SHORT and time was lagging for Jose Juan Rodriguez, rookie plainclothesman, around midnight in the squad room of Hollywood Division station house on that stuffy August night. The white wands of preview searchlights waved no longer over the forecourt of Grauman's Chinese Theater and tourists had given up casing the sidewalk star names on Hollywood Boulevard and gone back to their hotels and motels.

The handsome young detective with the Spanish features and the slim grace of a jai lai pro, was glad to sit out this pocket of time. He knew by experience that at dawn he would be scrambling about as usual, bringing in tipsy people, mink coats, stolen cars, jewelry. And perhaps snapping the cuffs on a mugg or two, maybe on one whose legs burned hot with slugs from his .38 service pistol.

At 12:43 the prospect suddenly changed, with the pleasant impact

A NEW JOE RODRIGUEZ STORY

of finding a fifty dollar bill. Art became long and time fleeting, with the intercom summons to the office of Lieutenant Fred Bennett, commander of the night watch.

"Know anything about art galleries, Joe?" said Bennett. "Theft Bureau seems to think you do. Downtown requested you by name. Temporary assignment."

The veteran then outlined what sounded to Joe Rodriguez like an intriguing assignment, though one far removed from the nightly roundup of nutballs and predictable thieves.

A Detroit TWX had tipped the Los Angeles Police Department that a covey of pro's known as The Bolt-Tighteners, was coming in to California to rob art objects of known great value from one of the nation's leading depositories, the Huntington Library and Art Gallery.

In a way, this was like saying that the U.S. Mint was going to be robbed of silver bullion, for Huntington maintained precise security. In addition, people who visited the two hundred acre estate in the plush community of San Marino, adjacent to Pasadena, were for the most part well-mannered devotees of the arts, including student groups which came by the bus load from all over Southern California.

"Captain Menelaus called his meeting for nine o'clock in the morning," Bennett explained. "It's a cooperative prevention deal, with detectives from outside who might be of special help. How about you going home and getting some sleep, so you can properly represent us?"

Rodriguez admired this quality of fairness in his boss. The long-experienced Bennett ran the station as if it was a boot camp, never hesitating to call on anybody in emergencies to serve a few tricks in a row. But Bennett always seemed to make up for the stern rule in little conveniences like this one.

"Thanks," said Rodriguez. "I can use it."

Home in his bachelor quarters, in a modest apartment on the fringes of Chavez Ravine, Rodriguez had a hard time getting to sleep, nevertheless. His mind raced with the implications of being requested by name. The Central corps of canny bureau and division heads must have liked the way he was doing things out in Nutville-by-the-Drive-ins. The lectures at the Police Academy six years ago had not been kidding. Here was proof that topside did keep its eyes open to recognize talent.

Detective Captain Bert Menelaus, the fierce-eyed grey eagle in charge of Theft Bureau, got to the point at once with Joe Rodriguez in the morning.

"We can expect some of your Hollywood weirdos to get in the act," said Menelaus. "You should

know 'em all by now. That's why you're here."

So he was here as a simple mugg spotter, Rodriguez thought. That wasn't exactly being a Mike Shayne.

Menelaus next brought him into a TV monitoring room and introduced him to three plainclothesmen: Lieutenant Mark Braintree, San Marino Police Department, a man who looked like a high school teacher in his forthrightness; Lieutenant Floyd Freelon, Pasadena, as debonair as a successful automobile dealer; and Detective Roy Johnston, Beverly Hills, who might have been a customer's man at a brokerage house. Rodriguez perked up, pleased to be on equal footing for the moment with people who outranked him.

"Let 'er go," Captain Menelaus growled into the intercom, and then turned on the closed-circuit TV set.

Lieutenant Ed Sesnon, headquarters administrative, and two assistants, all in uniform, came on the lit-up TV screen from a dumping room. Soon three men entered the room, ushered by police guards, who brusquely ordered them to sit down in chairs opposite the lieutenant.

Sesnon held three file cards, large size, in his hand, close to his chest.

"Mack Rellisso," he said, making a pretense of reading off the card. That was one use of the card: to scare the fellow who never got to read it. "Out of Toledo. Two years in Columbus Penitentiary for armed robbery. Booked as John Rales in Detroit. What are you doing in Los Angeles, Rellisso? Did you just drop by to get Benes?"

The man addressed, whose rock of a chin was thrust out, said, "What's the charge? Nobody told us why you picked us up."

Sesnon ignored the question and said, "We found Benes roughed up pretty bad. But not so bad he couldn't talk a little."

"We ain't had nothing to do with this Beans or anybody else."

"Not talking, are you? You don't want to save yourself from a rap?"

Rellisso looked away contemptuously and said nothing.

Sesnon studied a second card and said, "Robert Sproule. Vagrancy in Nevada. Vagrancy in San Francisco. What are you doing for a living, Sproule?"

Sproule, unshaven and ragged in his clothes, replied, "I didn't do nothing, sir. We was just pooling it in the room. Made a straight deal, three for the price of one and a half, with the landlady. We was doing nothing."

Sesnon went onto the third man, Mel Irwin. Rodriguez immediately recognized him as a fag who had drifted into the original Hollywood meeting place of the beats several years ago and then

disappeared, probably going to Venice, the more popular beatnik headquarters adjacent to Santa Monica.

In a few seconds a fourth man was brought in, assisted in walking by a hospital orderly. The man's face was patched with adhesive tape and mercurochrome was painted on some bulging knobs.

"Look 'em over, Benes," said Sesnon. "Are these the men?"

Len Benes took a brief look—a courtesy look, Joe Rodriguez judged, as if he were acting out a part—and said, "No, sir. Not them."

Captain Menelaus clicked off the TV set.

"Lying to the high heavens," he said. "Every one of them. We know Sproule and Irwin are locals hooked up with the newcomer Rellisso. We found a watch belonging to Benes in Sproule's pocket. So what? We'll turn 'em out on Main Street and try to make it look like the jail is crowded this week. But they'll have that one figured out and they'll scram. We accomplish one thing, however. We put the brakes on any big plan, if that was what it was going to be."

"You say an informant tipped you on those three muggs?" Roy Johnston, the Beverly Hills sergeant, asked. "Did you get anything on him?"

Rodriguez noted that the well-dressed plainclothesman from the luxurious end of Wilshire Boulevard, favored shades of blue in slacks and haberdashery this season.

"The informant was telephone anonymous," Bert Menelaus replied, "but we found these goons just where he said. And later Benes was babbling their names when they wheeled him in to General Hospital."

Joe Rodriguez gave his rundown on Mel Irwin, whom he had once arrested on a minor offense. The San Marino officer had nothing to contribute. Nor did Freelon of PPD.

"I didn't bring you here just for the peep show," Menelaus took up again. "That was routine stuff, and perhaps without a bearing on our problem. First off the bat, the various commissioners and chiefs of the county have decided to cook up a cooperative defensive maneuver to kill off any attempt to rob *objets d'art,* as they say, from the Huntington Library and Art Gallery.

"It seems that certain objects of art are getting so rare that big-time fences are operating, particularly in Eruope, to buy and re-sell the stuff at jumbo prices. I've got an expert on the art subject coming in to wise us up on what are the most valuable pieces."

He paused an instant, then went on: "Our information about a possible major theft could be the McCoy. A syndicate could be op-

erating, raking in important money, for little risk and effort. Now everybody here has probably been to the Huntington Library and Art Gallery and knows what a whale of a job they do in security."

Joe Rodriguez had never been there and so he felt it best to speak up and admit it.

"Well," said Menelaus, "I admire your candor. The first step is obvious. Go see for yourself, today or tomorrow." To Braintree of San Marino, the captain said, "How would you describe their security?"

"I don't see how it could be improved upon," Braintree said, "considering the character of the institution. As you know, it's an endowed foundation. Its exhibitions are free to the public, every day except Monday, one to four-thirty p.m. The security is so apparent that it may seem out of place, almost too much for the scholarly atmosphere there. You know, a kind of reverence and respect comes into most visitors when they walk into the presence of that marvelous collection."

An orderly came into the room with word that Miss Sari Seccolen of the Los Angeles *Record* had arrived.

"Our art expert," said the captain. "She's the *Record* Art Editor. This little lady knows what she's talking about. Comes from a rich family in Holmby Hills. She's a newspaperwoman just to be doing something."

She would not have to do much, Rodriguez decided when he shook her hand, to be welcomed by most any profession purely on the ornamental side. It was not only the trim figure and the chic clothes that aroused him instantly. It was a second-look face such as he had never noticed before in his young life.

A look of bold appraisal in the dark amber eyes was also somehow approving. That was her chief

magnet to men. The motionless concentration ordinarily associated with contact lenses was here present in unassisted eyes. A free-swinging pile of deep black hair framed a tanned face.

In Joe's way of thinking, the girl might have created the current face mask of movie actresses. Yet there was no pancake make-up, no eye-cavern soot on the woman. Rodriguez began to feel slightly hypnotized. He noticed that his fellow officers were just as completely under the girl's spell.

"It's not difficult to understand why thieves might want to make off with certain Huntington treasures," she said in her informal lecture. "They were handcrafted by artists and artisans long dead, whose work just can't be equalled by the present generation."

As she went on into the details of various displays in the Library and Art Gallery, Rodriguez considered that the theft prevention job mostly called for the use of antishoplifting techniques, pure and simple. Of all the art objects described by Sari Seccolen, the only things stealable would be the lightweight and reasonably small articles, such as clocks, torcheres, candalabra, commodes, miniatures, silver and comfit boxes.

Rodriguez asked Sari Seccolen, "How about the small items, such as a rare book—"

"Or a French snuff box?" she supplied. "You gentlemen will find that everything of that nature is under glass, locked up, as well it should be. For example, the Lincoln letter to General Grant, Shakespeare First Folios, and so on. The only people authorized to handle materials are the faculty and the students in residence, the ones who are using library facilities to earn higher degrees in their specialties.

"I'm going to be at Huntington tomorrow," she concluded. "If any of you gentlemen should like an amateur guide, just ask the guard at the Library public entrance where to reach me."

BACK AT DE LONGPRE and Wilcox and the Hollywood Division station house, Lieutenant Bennett was tremendously interested in what had transpired. Joe Rodriguez wondered why and asked him as much.

"Types of robbery are still going in cycles," he said. "Last year it was all bank heists. Before that narcotics, diamonds, mink storage, money trucks, super markets. It could be that art works are next. It's certainly getting common in Europe."

"But all the real art is in guarded museums and galleries—"

"Not necessarily, Joe. Take Lizabetta Bonnacci, the broad in that preview picture last night. I understand her home in Benedict Canyon is full of half a million dollars worth of French paintings

—originals by those artists you hear a lot about nowadays. Roualt, Picasso, Matisse, Toulouse-Lautrec and Fernand Leger.

Rodriguez had never imagined that Bennett's outside interests went beyond the current batting averages of the Dodgers ball club. He decided that it was high time he enlarged his own interests and learned something about this art kick. If movie people put their own money into it, it must be important.

When Rodriguez thought in this vein, he did not realize it but he was being influenced by a picture in the back of his mind. This picture was artistic: the appraising-approving face of Sari Seccolen. She represented a hidden world. There had been no one remotely like her in Joe's East Los Angeles neighborhood where the pretty senoritas grew up to be proficient in cooking and sewing rather than in understanding objects of art.

Some time past 1:00 p.m. the next day, Rodriguez drove off the Pasadena Freeway at California Street and headed east towards the northern border of San Marino, which border was in fact the northern edge of the Huntington acreage. The young detective had chosen his most conservative sport coat of Oxford grey with silver buttons. The slacks were dark green and the shirt and tie made a contrast of two lighter shades of green. Very solid, judged Rodriguez; solid like a student studying for a higher degree.

His mood of self-appreciation quickly gave way to one of professional curiosity as he drove down Orlando Road, the estate border. At the two gates to the premises on this end, king-size road-building truck units blocked off entry. Repairs of a major nature appeared to be going on somewhere. He drove on to Oxford Road, intending to enter the grounds at Stratford Road, the main gate.

Fire engine sirens sounded ahead. Car traffic began pulling to the right at this sound, in order to be legally out of the way. However, Rodriguez drove on south. As a police officer, he could identify himself and try to be of help if an emergency developed.

A long block farther on, Rodriguez came upon the commotion of two fire engines in the street and firemen breaking out the hose. A plume of flame and smoke was shooting high in the air from in back of a sizable private residence on the east side of Oxford Road. He noted that the house had a *For Sale* sign posted on the lawn. Cars and people began to back up in a mass of disorder on the other side of the fire-fighting equipment.

He glanced at the smoke and decided that he could do best for himself by getting through and out of the way. The firemen could surely handle this medium-sized backyard blaze, whatever it was.

But farther south, Rodriguez was stopped dead on his tires. Automobiles occupied both lanes of the street and were hopelessly clogged around the Stratford Road driveway entrance to the public parking lot. He drew in to the curb and parked.

Rodriguez was now putting two and two together, by second nature. The situation could well be a diversionary operation to allow 'shoplifters' to escape with a haul of high-valued items. But if such proved true, it would have to be a very expensive tactic of diversion, almost too costly in view of the stakes involved.

Rodriguez hurried from his car and passed through wrought-iron gates. A crowd of several hundred people clustered around the entrance pavilion, where they were being restrained from entering by black-uniformed guards. The guards appeared to be competent middle-aged men. Their precautionary move was understandable in view of the noisy disorder outside the grounds. Rodriguez shouldered his way to the fore, showed his credentials, and moved ahead.

"Head on, to the right at the big oak tree," the guard said, explaining the location of the Library's public entrance.

But Rodriguez did not complete this last leg, past the great bronze statues of Hermes, Hercules, Diana, and Apollo, to the entrance door and to the guard who would tell him where to reach Sari Seccolen.

As he walked up the road, a helicopter in swift descent, caught his eye. The medium-sized aircraft whirred down on the south side of the big two-story Georgian-Colonial mansion which housed the Art Gallery. The word POLICE was lettered in white across the fuselage.

Simultaneously, people scurried out of the great gallery building and on to surrounding lawns. They had evidently been warned to leave. There was some kind of scare taking place, the way the people scattered. The guards must have ordered them out, Joe thought. This handsome white residence, Rodriguez knew from Sari Seccolen's neat lecture, was the former home of the estate owners and had been converted into the Huntington Art Gallery.

Entry was through the expansive loggia on the east side. The Main Gallery—the one containing the cream of the English 18th Century masterpieces—was located in the northwest corner of the first floor. Rodriguez judged that the helicopter had landed on the south terrace, which fronted the wide house.

Rodriguez made his way across the lawn, into the excited crowd, and there learned that something was happening inside. A man with a pistol in his hand had shouted and ordered everybody to leave.

Men had scuffled with guards, upstairs and down. Rodriguez wondered what had happened to the guards. He found out about the guards in a little less than two minutes.

As Rodriguez walked into the loggia, he was now alone, and with his service pistol at the ready. The blast of a motor sounded from the south terrace. The helicopter arose in vertical flight. The young detective rushed inside to an empty foyer and looked down an empty passageway which was lined with white columns. A noise of pounding came from upstairs, as if feet were being kicked on the floor.

Rodriguez moved warily down the great lofty hall, past its twin spiral staircases. His hope was to take any thief by stealth and disarm him or shoot him. No one was in sight. Looking to the right at the end of the hall, he saw a body on the floor. The upper part of this body was hooded by a brown burlap sack.

He studied the body and moved forward to it. The barrel of a pistol jammed into his back.

"Put up your hands," a voice said.

Rodriguez heard the jingle of handcuffs untwining. He turned sufficiently to see the man with the pistol was a guard in black uniform.

"I'm a police officer," the young detective said. "Rodriguez, Los Angeles Police Department. Look in this pocket. My I.D."

In the seconds that it took to assure the guard, Rodriguez learned that the helicopter was heading north by west; and that the guard was from the Library detail. He had rushed over to investigate the milling crowd and the mystery of the unanswered calls to the Art Gallery staff.

"Let's try upstairs," said Rodriguez, remembering the kicking sound.

The guard led the way, pistol in hand in front of him, past magnificent canvases, up spiral staircasing—eastward to a luxurious showplace, the Georgian Drawing Room. Muffled cries now sounded. Four guards were laid out on the floor, sack coverings over their heads and their hands handcuffed behind them. Some were inert, evidently knocked unconscious.

The others were wriggling furiously and kicking their feet to attract attention. Rodriguez wondered how many other guards were likewise rendered helpless about the premises. It was apparent that at a common signal, all guards, upstairs and down, had been overpowered, several goons to a man.

"Mr. Rodriguez," a woman's voice came to Joe from the rear. He shifted around, to look into the agonized face of Sari Seccolen.

"Come with me," she said, and led him down the staircase to the

Main Hall: then down the hallway and around to the Main Gallery. By now the lower floor was alive with guards and officials, all peeking, with dismay in their faces, into the several adjoining display rooms.

At the Main Gallery, Sari Seccolen pulled on Joe's arm, roughly urging him inside the high-ceilinged room. She seemed sick with tension.

"They've stolen 'Blue Boy'," Sari said. She dropped down on a viewing seat from the personal shock of the statement.

Rodriguez followed the direction of her hand. A blank section of wall, a bit lighter in color, about six feet by four, stared back. The thieves had ripped away the painting by jimmying it off, frame and all.

Rodriguez now saw that Sari Seccolen was glassy eyed from hypertension. There was nothing he could do for her. She had to get accustomed to this impossible theft of the Gainsborough masterpiece. He looked around the cavalcade of large canvases to the left of 'Blue Boy's' former position of honor.

In the west wall, a particularly large, life-size canvas was centered. He was later to learn that this was the 'Sarah Siddons as the Tragic Muse', by Sir Joshua Reynolds. His eyes roved to the south wall where a gaping space showed that the thieves had come for more than 'The Blue Boy.' He nudged Sari's shoulder.

" 'Pinkie' was there," she said. She was now in control of herself. " 'Pinkie', by Sir Thomas Lawrence."

Rodriguez noted that the vacated space was about five feet by three.

Sari pointed again, this time to the right of 'The Blue Boy' empty space on the north wall. A small space, about four by three, was vacant.

She said, " 'Lady Hamilton in a Straw Hat' by George Romney. They took three of the greatest portraits in the world."

Joe Rodriguez considered that the thieves had taken three of the easiest to carry, too, because many of the remaining canvases were giant portraits, some seemingly larger than life, and impossible to remove without mechanical aid. Again, the planning of the robbers impressed Rodriguez.

At the doorway, the fallen man with the sack on his head refused to respond to medical attention. When the sack was pulled off, he was seen to have little strength left. He gazed towards the Main Gallery, whispered, "My God, how terrible," and lapsed into unconsciousness.

An ambulance attendant, arriving shortly after, looked up from his examination and said, "He's gone."

The dead man was not a guard,

the young detective now saw. He was some very concerned civilian who had fought the thieves, judging by the splashes of blood on his face.

Sari Seccolen sorrowfully identified him. "He is John Bassman," she said. "A graduate student from Yale. He was doing research in the Library manuscript vaults."

Reporters began showing up in the building, running about and interviewing anybody who would say a word. Sari Seccolen now got on the job herself, with the realization that her Art Editor duties had expanded into those of general assignment crime reporter.

Rodriguez was aware that there was plenty for him to be doing in his own job. He hurried back to the entrance pavilion. Visitors were being checked out individually through a line of guards. A uniformed SMPD officer in crash helmet was directing the informal identification.

Rodriguez stepped in and became the man's assistant in moving people along. But everyone of the hundreds of people was apparently a harmless guest, genuinely incensed over the spectacular robbery.

"This job had to take a small army of hard-boiled goons," Rodriguez said to the fellow officer, when the crowd had been cleared.

The officer replied, "Lieutenant Braintree believes the gang dispersed all over the grounds. He's

going to set up a watch around Orlando, Avondale, and Euston streets to trap anybody going over the fence."

Setting out in search of Braintree, Joe Rodriguez soon judged that the perimeter watch idea was only a half measure. Police track-

ing dogs and a line of armed beaters would be a better answer in the foliage-thick stretches of the enclosure. This judgment came after several miles of exhausting walking in the heavily cultivated areas. The place was truly vast; big enough, he noted, to hold in a solitary corner the large white-columned mausoleum in which the generous donors were entombed.

Crooks could hide away for long periods in the avocado and fruit groves, in the leafy gorge of the Japanese Garden, and in the close-planted ten-acre maze of the Cactus Garden, which happened to be the world's largest of its kind. A hundred natural hiding places in foliage and undergrowth were available.

So we were thinking of some five-and-dime thief smuggling a vase, or a mantel clock, or at the worst a XVI Century bronze miniature, out under a coat, Joe Rodriguez considered. One, two, three persons in a shoplifting stunt. Oh, brother, what a miscue!

It was plain that here was one of the biggest art heists ever staged. Three world-famous paintings, including 'The Blue Boy' which was almost as well known as was 'Mona Lisa.' Three paintings which had cost hundreds of thousands of dollars each fifty years ago, and the value of which today could only run into the millions.

The ring had to have big money to finance the job. Yes, they had to have big daring and big ruthlessness and big brains, too.

By now, Huntington was sealed tight as a drum. Late-arriving reporters and lesser officials were arguing with the guards at the gate, trying in vain to get in. Print men were starting at the seemingly hopeless task of brushing in the Main Gallery, though it was fairly certain that the invaders had used gloves in their work.

JOE RODRIGUEZ reported in by phone to Lieutenant Bennett and was instructed to report until further notice to Captain Bert Menelaus, who was now set up as a central control for the detective bureaus of all cities cooperating on the case.

Rodriguez retrieved his car and returned down the Pasadena Freeway to the Police Building in Civic Center. There he learned that the helicopter had been cleverly used as part of the diversionary tactics.

A retired couple of Pasadena had spent the day in tree-shaded Brookside Park, adjacent to the Rose Bowl in Arroyo Seco, relaxing at the picnic benches. A helicopter had flown in, landed on the grass, and taken up groups of three and four persons for sightseeing flights over the Rose Bowl area and Pasadena. Then the helicopter returned on what proved to be its last flight. *Police* had been mysteriously painted on the fuselage between flights.

Several flat, canvas-wrapped packages, "Long as six feet," the man figured, were quickly transferred from their lashings on the helicopter's side, into a station wagon. The picnic group of half a dozen people immediately departed in the wagon and three passenger automobiles. The helicopter lifted off and headed in the northwesterly direction of Montrose and La Canada, flying very low.

"The tower at Lockheed Airport has no radar or sight record of the helicopter," Menelaus explained. "It probably slipped out of view on the north side of the Verdugo Hills. Palmdale has set up an air screen. No results yet. Our picturenapper has probably set down in some lonesome corner of Angeles National Forest."

Hearing this further evidence of precise planning and undoubted big expense, Rodriguez felt more than ever that his idea of combing the Huntington estate was a good one. The thieves could be expected to come up with some kind of surprise in their methods of collecting confederates who had necessarily been left behind on the grounds. Nonetheless, the young detective had a hard time convincing Menelaus.

"You make it sound like the jungle at Disneyland," said Menelaus.

"I'm not kidding," said Rodriguez. "I could put a man down blindfolded in that Cactus Garden and he would think he was in the wilds of Mexico."

Menelaus finally agreed. He despatched an officer to the Main Street housekeeping room to try to find some articles belonging to Rellisso and his cronies. With these materials, he said he would experiment a bit, Huntington permitting, by giving a scent to leashed bloodhounds and seeing what the dogs could flush up.

Shortly after the assignment of that project, the switchboard plugged in a prowl car of LAPD, operating in Highland Park, the Los Angeles suburb midway on the Arroyo Seco Parkway flanking the Pasadena Freeway. Two vehicles without license plates had been discovered parked tandem on a lonely road that skirted Mt. Washington, one of the highest residential rises in the City of Los Angeles.

"There's a little pamphlet on the floor of the wagon," the prowl officer reported. "From Huntington. The kind they pass out to visitors. Has a map and tells about the joint."

"Stay with the cars," said Menelaus. "We're sending the Fuller Brush Man. What's the serial number on that wagon?"

Sixty - seven - dash - nine - seven - three - six - six. Color of white. St. Claire series of Chevy."

"You've found wheels, buddy. It was taken from the Make-Ready department of a Van Nuys

auto dealer this morning. The plates removed were phonies because the car has never been registered."

The second vehicle was a 1963 Ford Galaxie.

"Whoever owns that heap probably doesn't know it's been stolen yet," said Menelaus.

"Now," he resumed with Rodriguez, "the sooner we put the collar on Rellisso and company, the sooner we get started—and don't keep telling me how important this heist is. Already the chief Commissioner has been on the horn. 'We must have fast results,' the man says. Yes, indeed, he would like that."

"He probably knows the difference between a late and early Gainsborough," said Joe, "which is more than I did until the other day."

Menelaus laughed. "You're thinking of my little expert," he said. "Well, you can't say we didn't get you expert advice. Look at this." He shuffled some departmental news flimsy and picked out a bulletined paragraph, reading, " 'Reward of ten thousand dollars for information leading to the capture of criminals involved in Huntginton Art Gallery robbery was announced by Creighton Johns, industrialist banker of Bel-Air.'

"The connection, Joe, is that Miss Seccolen is the daughter of Mrs. Radi Seccolen, who in turn is a large holder of securities of the Johns industrial empire. Sari called me. Told me her mother influenced the old boy, who is evidently some kind of a shot in art circles. I said okay, although I should have had better sense."

Rodriguez knew what the captain meant by that. Lieutenant Bennett felt the same way. Reward offers can gum up the works of crime detection through time lost listening to the inventive words of covetous crackpots.

It was now evening of the day of the crime and Rodriguez was established for the time being in a glassed enclosure adjoining Captain Menelaus. There, he was enjoying the sight of Sari Seccolen's by-line on the front page of the bulldog edition of the *Los Angeles Record*. The story was entertaining; sort of an art education along with the fantastic facts of a criminal ring pitting its wits against a great institution.

One facet of the robbery Sari emphasized: that whoever had gone to all the trouble and expense, and had caused a needless death to boot, would never be able to truly cash-in on the action. 'Blue Boy', 'Pinkie', and 'Lady Hamilton in a Straw Hat' were too well-known ever to be shown publicly, for fear of recognition. No art fancier or art dealer in his right mind would pay as much as one dollar of the millions-plus worth, to buy the paintings.

To Joe Rodriguez, the observation rammed home. Who, then, would go about hiring expert thieves and thugs in large quantities to accomplish his mission? Facts said that the person or persons would have to be very rich. Logic pointed to art lovers who would know quite well what they were going after.

Rodriguez decided to look up Sari and get a better line on who was who in the circle of heavy investors in gilt-edged paintings. First, though, he ran up against several minor road blocks in the form of duty interviews.

A prim little man of middle age was sent in to Rodriguez. He had refused to tell a word of his discovery to the desk receptionist.

"An art dealer has bought 'Blue Boy' from the crooks," the man emphatically said. "I'll show it to you in his store window in Glendale."

Joe Rodriguez knew that it had to be a lithograph reproduction, of course. There were any number of them. He duly noted the man's name and watched that reward-smile come on his face.

The phone rang shortly after and a man named Hentry Smith related to Rodriguez that a fat man in a grey striped vest had recently offered to sell him any painting of his choice in the Huntington Art Gallery. The phone caller had driven out to the gallery with the fat man, and there Hentry Smith had decided on 'Pinkie' by Sir Thomas Lawrence as the best picture by far.

But the fat man wanted two hundred fifty dollars for the picture and Mr. Smith wanted to think it over for a while. Hentry Smith was eager to put the police on the trail of the suspect, who he was quite sure was the man wanted.

Rodriguez got disentangled at last in time to keep his telephone-arranged date with Sari Seccolen at the Redwood Room near the *Record* office in Civic Center. She was flushed with her exciting drive to make the Final Home Edition with additional aspects of the story. The story was now shaping up in the mind of the general public as The Great Huntington Heist.

Rodriguez outlined his reasoning about the likeliest suspects. The appraisal-approval in her amber eyes at once dissolved into pure amusement.

"You have narrowed it down to about three men, Joe," she said, "and every one of them has departed this world. William Randolph Hearst Senior, John D. Rockefeller the First, and Andrew Mellon, friend of Warren G. Harding. I thought I got that point across in my story."

Rodriguez studied her as she talked with the ardor of knowledge. The flat, calculating set of his eyes was now a frame for the sparkle of admiration. "A painting

does something to you, doesn't it?" he said. "I guess I wasn't around when art appreciation was passed out."

A SMALL ADVANCE had taken place when Joe Rodriguez returned to the Police Building near midnight. Two more license-less cars had been found in the parking lot at Los Angeles International Airport. One car's serial number was that of a car reported stolen in the beach town of Venice earlier in the day.

The plates belonging to the car had turned up in the hands of a small boy, who had found them in a garbage can. The find was in the pattern of the wagon-and-car abandonment in Highland Park and offered a possibility of furnishing prints.

However, Rodriguez and his Theft Bureau companions had to reduce their efforts during the remainder of the night. If a detective can't see far, he can't catch up with too much.

At 4:57 a.m., asleep in his bachelor apartment on the fringe of Chavez Ravine, Jose Juan Rodriguez nevertheless was brought back abruptly into the case. A phone call came from Theft Bureau, ordering the rookie plainclothesman to go at once to the prison bay, County General Hospital. Len Benes appeared to be dying on them, and coked up with pain-reducing drugs as he was, the member of the Detroit Bolt-Tighteners gang was evidently on the verge of singing.

Rodriguez went up an elevator in the giant hospital structure, passed through a jail-barred gate, and asked for an orderly's white coat. He had in mind trying to promote deathbed friendliness with Len Benes. Ordinarily, the man would be expected to clam up, but under the special circumstances there was a chance that he would talk.

Captain Menelaus, who looked like he, too, had just been awakened, was in the corridor outside of a singleton private room.

"We're treating him like a V.I.P.," said Menelaus, "to sooth his nerves. When he was in that ward room he was scared stiff somebody was going to blast him. He's rambled a bit about Mack Rellisso. Nothing firm yet, but Benes obviously hates his guts. Take it from there."

Rodriguez walked in and moved about, straightening out articles on a side table and checking the towel supply; not looking at the wide-eyed man who lay back on a raised pillow.

"You find Rellisso?" said Benes.

"Rellisso? Who's he?" said Rodriguez. "Friend of yours?"

"You're no cop?"

"I'm no cop. I just work here. Civil service."

"Do me a favor, buddy. Go see if Rellisso's outside."

"Nobody's outside, my friend. Nobody gets in here without permission downstairs. You go to sleep." Rodriguez could see that the man was weak as a kitten and at the same time completely awake and scared.

"I feel funny, pal. I want to get out of here and go back to Detroit. Rellisso cut me out of a big job. I want to go back. I'll get him at the airport when he shows up."

"He cut you out? You mean he took your share of some money?"

"I don't know who's running this job. All I know is The Man gave me an airplane ticket and said, 'You're Number One, Benes. Go out and take over from Rellisso.' "

"So Rellisso beat you up. That's too bad, mister."

"Rellisso is a cheap two-bit crum, buddy. He's taking orders, too."

Rodriguez sat down by the bed and lit a cigarette. He offered the package to the hood and clicked on a lighter for him.

"I was just reading about the heist," said Rodriguez. "Whoever staged that one must have passed out a barrel of folding money."

"Yeh, somebody loaded," said Benes. "Nobody reaches The Man back home unless he's in the Florida book."

Rodriguez decided to take a casual shot in the dark. He smiled as if he was thoroughly enjoying the little talk, and said easily, "You got to hand it to some of these guys. They're smart. I knew a fellow down in Venice once who—"

"Rosan, was it? I know Rosan. He's a contact. Not much guts. The Salesman, they call him."

"No, that wasn't his name. Not Rosan."

Benes began coughing at this time, wracked by some interior pain that would not let up.

"Hey, mister," said Joe. "I better call the nurse."

Twenty minutes later Rodriguez reported back to Menelaus and soon the captain returned inside, in the company of an interne and a nurse.

Joe Rodriguez went home, took a slab of breakfast steak out of his refrigerator, and fried up a hearty

meal. The orange-red of dawn flooded the sky over the railroad yards in back of Union Station. It would be several hours before he could expect to find anybody reachable in the Venice area, so he settled down to enjoy a bit of time out, a time for turning over in his mind the latest developments in the case.

It was becoming clear that several straw bosses handled parts of the overall theft plan. Perhaps there was one for the helicopter phase, to handle its dry runs, to paint the Police marking. Another leader would have to be on the job to bring the strong-arm gorillas to the grounds in the guise of visitors and direct the timed attack. The extensive diversionary measures certainly required an intelligent director.

Such a set-up had to have a powerful top director. For now it was evident that some of the straw bosses had quarreled amongst themselves without upsetting the master plan. Perhaps Benes knew who the top director was, although saying otherwise.

Consequently, Rodriguez held to his first speculation: that some very well-heeled devotee of art must be directly involved. He would probably be an unusual type in a position to make connections with the underworld at the top level. He would have to be an egotist and could well be a crazy man in the bargain.

The direction of Venice seemed a rational one to Rodriguez at this stage of meager clues. A part of the sprawled-out City of Los Angeles, the oceanside town was a magnet for all sorts of artistic, noncomformist types. Many in the San Francisco beatnik colony, in their flight from North Beach, had fastened on Venice.

The little ancient resort town with its gardened streets, broken-down boat canal, and crumbling houses of three generations past, was a natural hide-out for people who disliked the public gaze.

Rodriguez started out on a straight case job, in the role of an unattached sightsee-er, with Detective Sergeant Emmett O'Shaughnessy, LAPD, a plainsclothesman working out of Venice substation. First stop was the location where the set of license plates had been found. Rodriguez noted that two blocks away the small shopping district began.

The officers moved along and dropped into the first bar they encountered in that district. It was more of a coffee house than a bar and was populated by clusters of young men and women loungers who mostly wore the beat uniform of sandals, skin-tight slacks, and sweatshirts. Several black-bearded characters, new-day Bohemians wooing the Muse, were writing at tables. On the walls hung a number of lath-framed abstract paintings.

"Where would a guy on the lam hole up?" said Rodriguez.

"Let's go have a look," said O'Shaughnessy. The sergeant led the way to a closed-off street that ended at the water's edge.

Rodriguez thought the area picturesque in its oldness, a nice seaside setting. It was the opposite of grimy, stark hideouts from which movie crooks peer out of dirty windows at the free world.

O'Shaughnessy said wryly, "When they walk out in bathing trunks with surf fishing tackle, who's going to know whether they're torpedoes or office clerks out of work?"

"Now let's drop in on Benes's pal Rosan."

The sergeant had 'professional' acquaintance with the bearded, overweight six-footer named Vasque Rosan. The sergeant was writing a book, in the artist's understanding. O'Shaughnessy had qualified himself as friend by bringing a bottle of sherry to the Rosan pad on a night of jolly talk with a half-dozen would-be poets and novelists.

"Armando Ruiz," said the beach detective, in introducing Rodriguez. "I told him about your Freeway abstract, Vask, and he hoped he could see it."

Rodriguez judged that the loft space studio on the top floor over the grocery store resembled a storage vault of paintings more than it did a studio. Several hundred framed pictures were stacked in files along the walls. A ragged blue carpet presented an unsuccessful attempt at wall-to-wall covering.

"I knew you were coming, man," said the bluff Rosan. "I woke up this morning knowing there was an appreciator in my day." He lifted a six feet by four canvas from the wall files and set it up on an easel.

O'Shaughnessy stood off in silent contemplation.

The strangling loops of the subject did in fact suggest the inevitability of death on a heartless concrete skein. The blacks, copper greens, and tawny yellows were stippled with red dots denoting crashing death in the fast left lanes.

Rodriguez wanted to sound off in praise, honest praise. But he did not do this at all. He had come to the hangout to take the man's emotional temperature, to try to figure him out. To do that he felt that he must use the technique of his boss, Lieutenant Fred Bennett, and rouse the man's antagonisms.

"I don't see the freeway in it, if you don't mind me saying so," said Rodriguez.

"What else do you not see?" Vasque Rosan immediately said. His voice bit.

Rodriguez noted the smolder of hate in the brown eyes. "Would you mind explaining it to me?"

"I don't intend to explain a damned thing to you," Rosan re-

plied curtly. "Buy yourself a camera, man. Take nice colored postcards."

Behind Rodriguez, O'Shaughnessy had been carrying on a pantomime with Vasque Rosan, forming the boxed hands of a square and revolving his fingers around his ears, as if winding up the clockwork of Rodriguez's head. The signs of scorn apparently encouraged Rosan to continue his estimate of Rodriguez's intelligence.

"I have nothing to say to you that you could possibly understand," Rosan continued. "If you came to our village to see pictures, I suggest that you stop in at Tim Hanley's tavern up the street and see his collection of nudes. And now, Emmett O'Shaughnessy, I'm afraid I have other things to do. Good day."

JOE RODRIGUEZ reached the street with the feeling that he may have ruined a friendship for O'Shaughnessy. Nevertheless, he was pleased at pinning down the personality of Vasque Rosan, the man they called The Salesman. If the man was actually a contact used by the underworld, then he would have to be trapped red-handed in some criminal act. Interrogation would not go far with this waspish fellow.

"Did I look dumb enough?" Rodriguez asked, straight-faced.

The neon sign of a two-story bar building now showed up: HANLEY'S HAVEN. The place immediately struck Rodriguez as a good normal place to light. He was fed up with beats and their haunts by now.

"Let's go in and see what kind of an art appreciator I am," he said.

On entering, Rodriguez now saw that here was a radically different image of Venice than all that had gone before. The place could have been set down in the plushest parts of Wilshire Boulevard. It was semi-dark, richly furnished, and prices were first cabin.

"You hardly expected to see a place like this, did you?" O'Shaughnessy said. "The story goes that Tim Hanley was once a steam room rub-down jockey in a New York club and one of the members remembered him in his will. At any rate, Hanley clicks with the tonier trade. There he is now, just sitting down at the corner table. He's quite the formal Irishman. Not much of the jolly, beaming Mine Host about him. Leaves that to his maitre 'd."

Rodriguez observed that the estimate was accurate. Tim Hanley was a trim crew-cutted article, a handsome oldster, and quite a contrast with his Venice neighbors.

He took an appraising look at the nudes over the bar and thought the paintings were old-fashioned in their treatment. Women shingled the back of their hair and puffed it on top or sides nowadays

When they left the elegant bar and passed its parking lot, Rodriguez noted the presence of five or six ultraluxurious automobiles among the line-up of customer cars.

"Doesn't quite fit this neck of the woods," he said to the sergeant, indicating the cars.

"Venice gets a certain amount of slummers from up in the hills," Sergeant O'Shaughnessy replied, nodding.

By now Rodriguez was itching to get back on the job at the Theft Bureau. He was pleased that he had cased Beatland and met Vasque Rosan face to face. But this had not turned out to be the main stream of investigation.

Menelaus's desk was littered with little pieces of note paper when Rodriguez walked in. Colored pins marked up a wall map of Los Angeles County. The central corner idea was working. The captain ripped off orders to one after another subordinate on his stream of phone calls.

"Benes is dead," Menelaus said, when a free moment came. "It begins to look like he was bigger than we thought. Sort of an executive assistant sent to watch things. At any rate, Len Benes shuffled off with his mouth full of information. The helicopter, for example, it was bound for Soledad Canyon. Mack Rellisso, he was low on the totem pole, but had wormed out some of the more important details of the plan, from somebody along the way.

"That was why The Man back in Detroit got scared and sent Benes. About the contact Vasque Rosan, I just now instructed Sergeant O'Shaughnessy to bring him in on protective custody warrant. About the Huntington gallery itself, your bloodhounds have smelled down three hungry strong boys on the estate but none of them admit to knowing anybody but Rellisso. And just before Benes kicked the bucket, he blurted out something that sounded like Temmanlee—"

"Tim Hanley," said Rodriguez.

"You got a Tim Hanley in Venice?"

"We got a name," said Rodriguez. "He's a fancy Mick saloonkeeper. Out of place among the beats."

As the detectives were talking, a citizen of San Marino was waiting for them to finish. He soon identified himself to the captain and Rodriguez as the owner of the home on Oxford Road, the home with the *For Sale* sign.

"I agreed with a real estate man from Los Angeles," he said, "to vacate my property for a day so he could bring out a prospective buyer's family and look it over leisurely. The man, named Baker, appeared normal enough, so my wife and I drove down to Palm Springs for the day. Today I called the number he left with me, and

the real estate firm said they never heard of him."

"We'll soon find out," said Menelaus. "Rodriguez, show this gentleman the mugg shots.."

The San Marino home-seller immediately put his finger on the police photo of Mack Rellisso.

Not long after that, the leader of the helicopter search detail reported in from Acton, a village in Soledad Canyon. A rancher remembered a helicopter disappearing behind a knoll in the afternoon of robbery day. Investigation disclosed rotor blades in a storage barn of a heavy construction company, South Associates, Ltd., which was currently working on a section of the Palmdale-Lancaster Freeway. The fuselage of the helicopter was nowhere to be found. Deep tire imprints, truck-size, were in the dirt by the barn.

"No problem for a moving van to take that 'copter body somewhere else, out of sight," Menelaus said.

Rodriguez asked if the heavy road building equipment, which had blocked the Huntington's northern gates, was still in San Marino. The units were in position untouched, minus carburetors, awaiting prime-movers to pull them away for checking.

The serial numbers on the giant vehicles would be known to the manufacturer, Rodriguez reasoned. He hastened out to San Marino, copied off the numbers, and called the manufacturer's regional sales office—quickly confirming that the units had been sold to South Associates. A second call revealed that an equipment bay of South Associates in nearby San Gabriel, had been raided.

Now what, Joe Rodriguez considered. The how of it and the where had been pretty well checked out, but not the why and the who. The young detective wondered if Theft Bureau was paying too much attention to hide-bound procedures and not enough to imaginative speculation. The rookie did not realize it, but he was missing the Fred Bennett touch, always a goad to original thinking, to the shrewd guess and the take-a-chance move.

A message to call Sari Seccolen awaited Rodriguez when he returned to the Civic Center in the evening. He got her on the telephone.

"I want to see you," Sari said. "It's about my mother. She's feuding with Mr. Johns."

"I don't see the connection between me and a feud," said Rodriguez.

"It's a long story, Joe. Just remember that my mother and Mr. Johns are part of a quaint little world of their own. A kind of happy gas comes off big piles of money, let's say, and it sets up hallucinations in the people affected. At any rate, Mr. Johns has complained to my mother that the police are not making any progress

and are ignoring him in their operations."

"Ignoring him? He's a private citizen. The reward has only been in effect a day. Besides, putting up a reward doesn't buy him a ringside seat. Just what does he have in mind? Should we have sent him a scroll of honor?"

"Oh, be quiet, Joe. You don't understand these people. What's really bugging him is that he heard of Len Benes. He probably heard it at some club from a Police Commissioner. He complained to my mother that he should be consulted, that Benes might turn out to be the man qualified for the reward."

"Benes is dead. So what does he expect the police to do about it?"

"My mother wondered if I could get somebody, somebody like you, Joe, to call him up and sort of make him feel important. Friend of the Force and all that sort of fluff and stuff."

Rodriguez was amazed at this development. It had come out of left field, so to speak. He had never heard of such a situation. The young detective knew very well what Fred Bennett would have said: "Rescind the reward, right now."

But Menelaus was not Bennett. Menelaus operated in a more academic atmosphere. Perhaps he was better able to understand the whims of an eccentric millionaire, a man acting the maharajah with a small coterie of top-drawer friends and a retinue of business yes-men.

"It sure is a special little world of yours, Sari," said Rodriguez," but I'll go along with you this time." He was eager to take a close-up look at the man who was kibitzing an entire police force, but he did not want to show his hand. "It will be unofficial, of course. Can't be any other way. What do you want me to do precisely?"

THAT NIGHT AROUND 8:00 p.m., Rodriguez drove up to an attractive tile-roofed ranch house in Holmby Hills. It might have been mistaken for a small school but for the lack of a pole flying the California Bear Flag. He judged that Mrs. Seccolen was a rich woman, but one without grandiose tastes. There was no manorial wall surrounding the premises, such as common in the neighborhood.

Radi Seccolen had framed herself in a black-bricked lounge alcove to greet him. She glittered in the radiance of high-gloss make-up—movie preview glamor stuff, Rodriguez knew.

He also discovered where Sari got that patented appraisal-approval look in her eyes. Only Mrs. Seccolen's eyes were green instead of dark amber. She had done an exceptionally good job in stemming the tide of age, he judged. She had dieted, squeezed, and camouflaged herself down to the dimensions and appearance of an elder

sister to her daughter. He could appreciate why bald eagles and potso's in her circle of gentlemen friends would be inclined to flap attentions around her.

"Creighton Johns is a congenital miser," Radi Seccolen calmly explained the Johns idiosyncracies. "I would advise you to forget him. Tell him to got to hell."

"This last phrase startled the detective because of the naturalness of its use by the feminine-radiating Radi. "Except for one thing," she went on, "The police have actually made no progress whatsoever in catching the thieves and I think it is going to take a much more attractive reward before we get any action. We must have action."

Rodriguez remained silent. The lady was entitled to her bleak estimation of the situation, for Captain Menelaus was deliberately releasing information only in dribs and drabs.

"You agree, don't you, that a hundred thousand dollar reward would perk things up?"

"Not necessarily, Mrs. Seccolen. When a reward is unnaturally large it becomes almost a ransom. Thieves might contrive to negotiate. Offer to return the paintings for the money. As you know, they certainly can't sell them anywhere in the world."

"What would be wrong with that? We get the paintings back and that's what everybody wants."

"And the criminals would go free to stage some other clever haul. That's not the way enforcement works. There can be no compromises."

Sari now appeared, to end the growing tension between them. As the three drove to the Johns mansion, up on a higher hill slope of the Santa Monica Mountains, Rodriguez considered that Sari had been so right. Her mother was an inhabitant of a world apart and one accustomed to imposing its will on situations and people.

He was eager now to see how

she would stack up against the quibbling Creighton Johns, this man who pouted because the police had not pinned a Chicken Inspector badge on him and cleared decisions through his office.

The robust and ruddy Mr. Johns presented a smily image to Rodriguez: iron-grey hair in shining profusion; humor crinkling in friendly eyes. He was the movie idea of what a fabulous financier looked like. He indicated that he was mostly pleased at the call, but also alertly ready with ideas of his own. The detective plunged into a brief review of highlights of the case.

But Radi Seccolen anticipated the moment of Rodriguez's finishing—and Mr. Johns scarcely opened his mouth before she went to the attack. Now she was apparently out to refute Joe's ransom theory and she was not going to be shunted aside. As she gushed out words, Rodriguez noted the change in Mr. Johns. The image was now craggy, hard, icy.

"A half dozen people could pool the money," said Radi contemptuously. "The Pond Smiths, the Charlie Gatts, the Clemens Bardwells to name a few—"

Mr. Johns broke in with a downgrading, caustic laugh. "Evidently you think of me as a skinflint. That's all right with me, Radi. But try, just try to get Old Pond, Charlie, and Bardwell to contribute a five dollar bill apiece. Those birds are broke and nobody knows it. You're just travelling with the wrong crowd these days."

Johns laughed again in the same critical way and this time into the breaking fury in Radi Seccolen's indignant face.

She countered fiercely. "All right. They're broke. Well, I know exactly where I can get the support and get it fast. From the best friend I've ever had in the world after Carl Seccolen."

Mr. Johns appeared struck dumb at this statement and he turned his head away. There was almost a schoolboyish jealousy showing in the man.

"You know whom I mean," Radi went on. Her green eyes sought to meet the wandering gaze of Johns. "Hugh Rowland, of course."

The name came to Rodriguez as a mild surprise and this was principally because of the notoriety which had long surrounded Hugh Rowland, the master builder of missiles and airplanes.

Hugh Rowland was world famous for the millions that he had amassed. He directed his international interests through an army of vice-presidents. He was also world famous for being a gun-shy recluse. Hugh Rowland's name had been imprinted on more unserved subpoenas and miscellaneous legal papers than the name of any other modern-day multi-millionaire.

He had evidently made a game

of outwitting each and every attempt to put him on the witness stand in a court of law. He had sacrificed a fortune once rather than appear in a showdown case. The man was a mysterious wielder of personal power who had become a living legend, a kind of successor to the Swedish Match King, a man popping up in out-of-the-way parts of the world and running his empire by cable and radio telephones.

Creighton Johns's reaction was to drift into a stubborn pout. His ego had apparently been stung painfully by the mention of Rowland, a man who could probably buy and sell him seven days of the week. Rodriguez wondered if the self-sufficient Johns had decided that this very attractive woman was tossing aside his friendly devotion for another.

Rodriguez had seen more than one homicide case involving older people, people who appeared to the world to be safely beyond the pulls of emotion. Mr. Johns appeared to be heading for some kind of a scene. The plainclothesman decided to give him a break.

"I told Mrs. Seccolen earlier," said Rodriguez, "that we haven't the time to pay much attention to rewards, Mr. Johns. We have our own job to do and we're paid by the taxpayers to do it. I personally see no reason to increase the reward."

Joe Rodriguez noted that Sari looked all approval at him, with this statement. She arose to end the dissension, and at the signal, Creighton Johns swiftly renewed his affable image again. Joe had the feeling that a grateful old man escorted them to the door.

On the way home, Sari Seccolen said, teasing her silent, embittered mother, "Smooth down the ruffled feathers now. You can't win 'em all."

"We'll see," Radi said. That was all she said. Not even goodbye to Rodriguez at the big ranch house.

"Something gets into her," Sari explained away her mother. "When she's crossed she goes into a quiet rage. She's entirely wrong to insult Mr. Johns over nothing. He's been the most envied escort she could ever find. Now she's kicking this friendship out the window."

"She should have been in the movies," said Rodriguez. "They're running out of that kind."

JOE RODRIGUEZ was glad to get back on the job at the Theft Bureau, and catch up with the case. Woman baffled him.

Detroit police had confirmed the fact that The Bolt-Tighteners were still out of town and that The Man had not been seen along Woodward Avenue for some weeks, meaning that he had not returned from Florida and his incognito status on a Fort Lauderdale estate.

Vasque Rosan was in the high tank in the City Hall building,

yelling so loud that he could almost be heard far down below on Spring and Main streets. But Rosan had not dumped yet.

Members of the thieves chorus, nine strong and rounded up on the Huntington estate and elsewhere, all proved to be merely highly-paid hired help who had offered their effective strong-arm abilities at the rate of one grand for the day. Not a single goon would admit to being a Bolt-Tightener.

Mack Rellisso was still at large.

"The lady is talking through her hat," Menelaus reacted to Rodriguez's recount of the Bel-Air meeting. "Ten grand is a handsome reward in any league. That guy Johns is smarter than I thought he was. He's maneuvered her into giving him an out to withdraw if he wants."

"I don't think we should write off Mrs. Seecolen," said Rodriguez. "She seems to have a lot going for her. Say she cons this multi-millionaire into putting one hundred grand on the line? He'd never miss it. He could use it as a tax reduction item."

Menelaus laughed and said, "Then we'll set up a priority line, issue appointment tickets, and put you in charge of the Looney Bin Department, Joe."

Rodriguez went home to his rooms on the ravine, thinking to himself that Captain Menelaus might just have to do that little thing. He wondered if a call to Lieutenant Bennett could spring him from such a fate.

Nonetheless, the young detective learned in the morning that it was too late for personal defensive measures. The efficiency of trans-oceanic telephones and of jet airplanes being what they are—not to mention the power of nostalgia and women's wiles—a brand new personality had suddenly projected himself into the limelight: Hugh Rowland.

Mr. Rowland's press secretary in London issued exciting facts.

Hugh Rowland had consulted with friends familiar with the great Huntington robbery, and in consideration of his life-long interest in Southern California and its tradition of the fine arts, he had authorized a reward of one hundred thousand dollars for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the principal thieves and the return of 'Blue Boy', 'Pinkie', and 'Lady Hamilton in a Straw Hat'. Furthermore, Mr. Rowland was returning immediately to the United States and intended to do all in his power to promote progress in solving the mystery of the major theft.

"Let's hope the subpoena servers collar him at Idylewild," said Rodriguez.

"Somehow or other I think he'll fool them again," said Menelaus. "How does he do it? He'd make a good man on my staff."

"You're not kidding, captain."

said Rodriguez. Menelaus missed the irony.

Later in the day, Hugh Rowland's anti-court batting average was still intact. News came that he had left an airplane in Newfoundland and completed the flight in a private jet to the alternate-weather airport at Ontario, California, off the news trail. The information came once again from his hard-typing press man, now identified as Cleburn Townsend, who personally issued the release to newsmen, in Beverly Hills.

The problem now for process servers and newsmen was to gain entry to Mr. Rowland's palatial residence in Bel-Air. This, they knew, would be a formidable undertaking. They had tried vainly many times before. They had undergone cold rebuff and actual manhandling from estate private patrolmen. Hugh Rowland to all appearances lived his own life and liked it that way.

For the third consecutive day, The Great Huntington Heist was front page news in old Smogville. Though that was not exactly a record for a crime case, it did move the news event up into the class of the community's bigger kidnappings and murder trials.

Hugh Rowland was the news peg on the third day. What did the money king have in mind, the police wondered out loud, when he intended to do all in his power to promote progress in solving the mystery? He certainly could not do much if he followed the usual tactic of shunning public contact. Did he have a detective force of his own assembled for the task? It was hard to figure out.

Rodriguez pondered the situation in company with the Theft Bureau special staff. The consensus was to watch developments for twenty-four hours and at the first sign of any purely personal activity, to contact Rowland by means of a court writ. Out of deference to the man's importance, the contact could be made through a member of the Police Commission, who would remind the multi-millionaire that interference with lawful investigation would not be tolerated.

Jose Juan Rodriguez did not wholeheartedly support this view. He felt that first the undoubted influence of Radi Seccolen should be probed. Without much fireworks, she had proved herself a powerful persuader. She was bound to be among the favored few seeing Hugh Rowland and counselling with him.

Rodriguez decided to concentrate his time on her instead of Rowland direct. His first step was to work out details of round-the-clock surveillance with police of West Los Angeles station and Beverly Hills. Any time Radi left her ranch house, Rodriguez would know it. Further, he would learn her destination, be it club, restau-

rant, neighbor's house, or wherever.

In the sensitive evening hours of watch, the young detective would do the tailing himself. And anticipating that Radi Seccolen would visit the Rowland estate in Bel-Air, if only to thank the man, Rodriguez now applied himself to the problem of gaining access.

Long ago the financier had set up a privately-based international control room in the Rowland estate, in lieu of publicly-accessible office buildings. None of the curious had been able to beat the Rowland obstacles.

Rodriguez figured that there had to be a way to do it, a way short of an official search warrant. Even that last measure had not been used on Hugh Rowland, for one or another reasons.

A call to Detective Sergeant Roy Johnston of BHPD gave Rodriguez the information that an air view of the Rowland estate, known as Casa Blanca, could be found in a certain county history book at the public library. The photo helped a lot. It informed him that Casa Blanca was not a home but a small hotel, at least three times the size of the Huntington Art Gallery.

Yet large as the Rowland structure was, the groves of towering eucalptus, pine, and elm trees, and the thick stands of honeysuckle and bougainvillea screened the place from street view. Motor driveways led a quarter mile in to the concealed building. Aimless motorists would never know that Casa Blanca existed within the fortress-walled acres.

The best way to get in, Rodriguez decided, was officially, through the massive wrought-iron gates. Once in, the best way to stay in was to hide when the prowl car driver made his diversionary inquiries and departed. He had no trouble working up this minor deception with the LAPD prowl car team in the area. He went back to his vigil, waiting in the BHPD squad room by courtesy of Sergeant Johnston.

In the middle of the afternoon, the first alarm came to Rodriguez. Mrs. Seccolen had buzzed out in her Phinxa sports roadster and gone to a beauty salon on Wilshire Boulevard in the Beverly Hilton Hotel complex. That sounded promising to him. The beautiful woman was taking out some additional beauty insurance, perhaps, on her later call upon, or possibly from, Hugh Rowland.

It was a kind of a thrill in itself to the detective to anticipate that he would soon get to see the evasive millionaire in person. If the man was unleashing some form of private competition to LAPD, his activities might be spotted at the outset.

ABOUT TWO HOURS later, Mrs. Seccolen returned home. Rod-

riguez drove to her house, relieved the tail car on the job, and settled down to wait. The area's private patrol car came on duty, driving past him several times with no sign of recognition.

At 6:25 Radi Seccolen buzzed out again in the Phinxa. Her blonde hair was cased in a cellophaned hood. She was wrapped in a snuggle-puffed mink coat of the Autumn Haze shade, A nice casual little car coat, Rodriguez thought; just about fifteen thousand dollars worth.

The Phinxa climbed up into the hill rises, then turned into the drive of Casa Blanca. As Rodriguez passed by, he noted in the dim light that her car had been expected, for the gates were open and a stiffly deferential uniformed guard stood by.

He switched on the police radio band and sent a rendezvous message to the Westwood prowl car. Outside of UCLA's northwest corner, the prowl car awaited him as he drove up. To his surprise, Detective Sergeant Emmett O'Shaughnessy was the driver's companion.

"Menelaus sent me with a message," said O'Shaughnessy. "Vasque Rosan used his one telephone call to talk to Tim Hanley at the Venice bar. A bailbond lawyer showed up quick-like and sprung Rosan. We got a man sitting in Hanley's ready to bring him in for a little talk, but he hasn't returned yet. Now, what do you want me to do?"

Rodriguez explained that he would lie down in the back seat of the prowl car. He asked O'Shaughnessy to request a quick once-over of the motor driveway into the grounds and to engage the guard's attention, maneuvering him a fair distance from the car.

"That should be no problem," said O'Shaughnessy. "The private cops will be appreciating a little police cooperation since their boss just arrived home."

At the big gates, the blinking red lights of the prowl car went on. O'Shaughnessy took charge, getting out and ringing for the guard, and waving to him as the man switched on estate lights and hurried up front.

"His Honor's at home, we hear," said O'Shaughnessy. "We're taking a routine look around on account of the big fellow. Everything in good order tonight?"

The guard reacted by swinging open a gate. O'Shaughnessy walked up the drive, conversing affably with him. The prowl car followed closely, casting its headlight beams to light up the way. As the Venice sergeant made his inquiries about this and that branch of the motor road, a wing of the three-story, concrete fortress came into silhouette.

Rodriguez said, "Okay."

The car stopped briefly. Rodriguez crawled out and slid behind

shrubbery, to reach the building wall. From there, he watched his friends drive back and out of the gate.

Now, he thought, let's hope they've never got around to putting German Shepherd patrol dogs in this place. If they had them, he was afraid that LAPD would have a civil suit on its hands when he had to shoot them down in self defense. But he took his chances, as a good law enforcement officer has to.

He waited, motionless, for almost ten minutes and by that time he figured out the pattern of the informal posting of the guard: a walk-by every five or six minutes, with only two men executing the perimeter vigilance. He imagined that more guards were stationed in the dark along the far stretches of the high walls, and were ready to switch on lights throughout the grounds at a bonafide alarm.

Between rounds by the slow-paced guards, Rodriguez moved along the dark jungle of the shrubbery, away from the first wing and towards the second wing with its glow of lights on the first and third stories. Beyond this wing the main entrance terrace to the giant residence was outlined in soft radiance.

In time, the detective came to a section of the wall which was not blank masonry but had small windows, from which light poured through and illuminated the back facings of covering shrubs. Rodriguez judged that luck was now turning his way.

At the first window he saw that the interior was a huge basement room, handsomely furnished in the manner of a sports lounge, and seemingly empty. He continued past this and two more windows. The sports lounge led into another, more elegant room. This was a wood-panelled gallery, hung with paintings mounted above display tables which held bronze miniatures.

The effect was similar to the Huntington Main Gallery, but on a less imposing scale. Perhaps because there were no truly huge portraits, Rodriguez decided. He looked more closely, and at first was unable to believe his eyes.

Radi Seccolen and Creighton Johns sat on the edge of a small viewing seat, facing a painting on an easel.

The painting was Thomas Gainsborough's Blue Boy. Or a mighty convincing facsimile thereof.

Action was instinctive with Rodriguez. He did not stop a second to marvel, to debate whether or not the painting was the original or a copy. He worked forward in the shrubs as fast as the guard watch allowed him, reached the terrace, and rushed into a haze of light at the door.

A butler responded to his gentle swing of the knocker. Rodriguez pushed in the door, saying, "Los

Angeles Police. Take me to the art room downstairs."

A look at the service revolver of Rodriguez cut off words from the aged servant, and Joe reassured him, saying, as they walked into a foyer, "This is a protectionary measure. Mr. Johns and Mrs. Seccolen are in danger."

The butler appeared relieved and hurried down a flight of stairs with Rodriguez, into the sports lounge.

An unknown man had been in a corner of the room, out of range of outside vision, working on a portable typewriter at a desk. Rodriguez noted that he was of spare build, extremely pale, short, and semi-bald; about forty years old.

"I'm Townsend," the man said hastily. "What can I do for you? Did you have an appointment?"

"Rodriguez, Los Angeles Police," said the detective. He showed his pistol again and Townsend quickly stood aside. Rodriguez quietly stepped into the gallery and went forward to the silent couple on the view seat. Their backs were to him.

Mrs. Seccolen was first to hear his tread and shift around to look at the cause of the interruption.

"Mr. Rodriguez," she said. "What could you be doing here?"

Joe Rodriguez did not think that she looked particularly surprised. "What is that picture doing here?" He found it difficult to keep his eyes off it, now that he saw it up close, so powerfully did the rosy face and the brilliant blue of the English lad's courtier suit capture the imagination.

"Hugh has done it again," said Creighton Johns. "His people have found it somehow. All's well that ends well."

"This is a police matter, not a private affair," said Rodriguez. He felt a bit ridiculous, putting it that way, but he was sparring for time, trying to make up his mind how long to stall before arresting them with the traditional official phrase.

The role of either or both of them could be great or it could be small in the mystery of the picture's recovery. He was trying to maneuver them into making some revealing statement.

"Of course it's a police matter," said Johns. He was smiling brightly now, the image of agreement and cooperation. "The picture is here because Hugh Rowland wanted us to have a private showing before the police take it back to its owners."

"Where is he? How soon will he be here?" By now, Rodriguez fully intended to arrest Hugh Rowland and end the man's pretense of immunity from the law.

"At this moment he happens to be on his way to recover the other two pictures and he's bringing those back also for us to see."

Radi Seccolen had been studying the detective's face all this time. She said, "Aren't you thrilled

to pieces, Mr. Rodriguez, to see how things turned out? I told you as much last night."

"Indeed she did," said Johns. "I admit I was wrong when I opposed her."

Nonetheless, Rodriguez was not going to let himself walk into some kind of subtle trap. In his mind, the time was for action, regardless of who suffered, Sari's mother or not.

He looked around the walls at the sixteen paintings, but did not recognize any as being the other missing masterpieces. However, he was quite aware that an unqualified person like himself could not be sure.

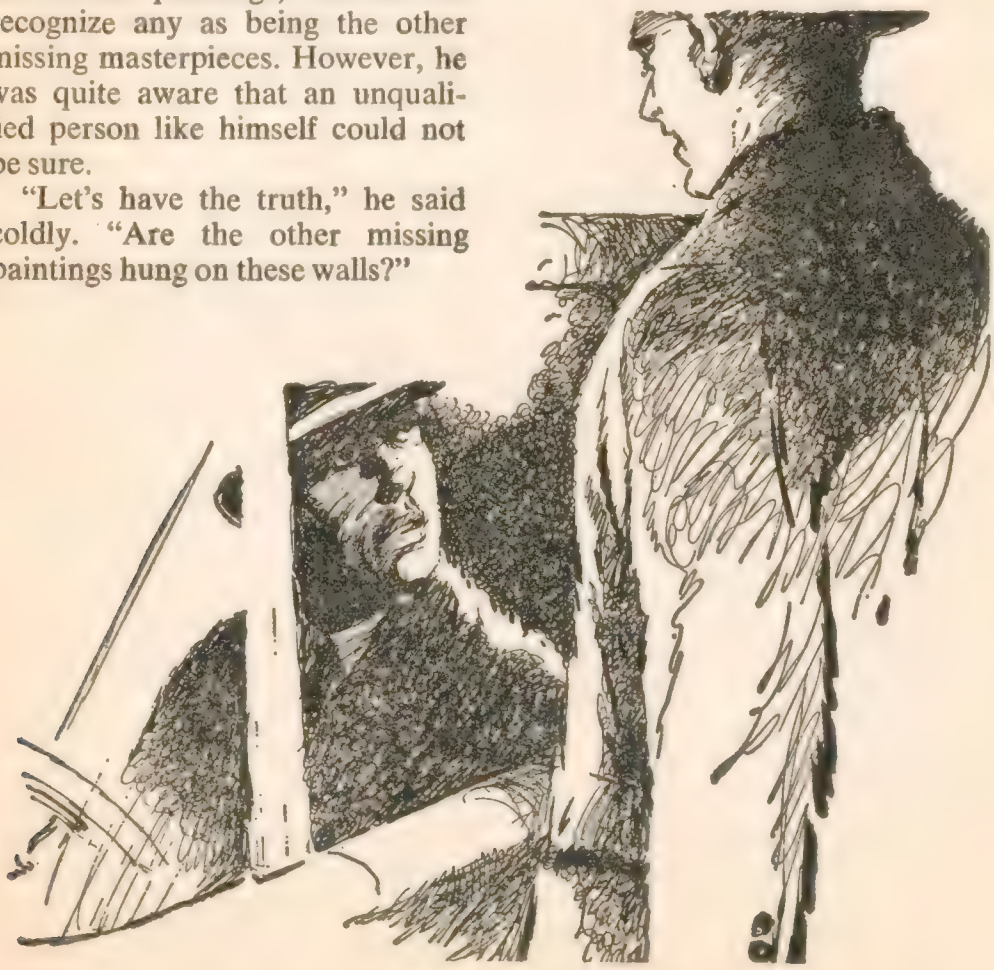
"Let's have the truth," he said coldly. "Are the other missing paintings hung on these walls?"

"Heavens, no," said Radi, now amused.

"Then where are they? You must know where Mr. Rowland went. Tell me right now or I'll be obligated to arrest you both and take you in."

The sudden realization of such a prospect switched Creighton Johns from smiles to jitters in a flick of a second.

"I'll be glad to take you there,"



he said hurriedly. "Radi, you had better go home. Don't wait for Hugh. I'll take Mr. Rodriguez to him right now."

"Okay. You may go, Mrs. Seccolen," said Rodriguez. "You wait here, Mr. Johns, until I come back."

Rodriguez turned around fast, to go to the door. For the first time, he saw that Townsend stood a few feet inside the room. He had evidently listened to the whole conversation. The young detective's reaction was to think that a good press representative has to do such eavesdropping.

On the telephone, Rodriguez swiftly requested West Los Angeles station to send the prowl car back—and learned that O'Shaughnessy and his friend were at this very moment parked in the shadows nearby the entrance of Casa Blanca, with the idea of reinforcing the Rodriguez efforts if necessary. Rodriguez ordered a show of red lights, with Emmett O'Shaughnessy to meet him at the front door.

In several minutes, loud arguing outside the door announced the now belligerent O'Shaughnessy. Rodriguez took him below to the art gallery. Creighton Johns was alone, again raptly contemplating Blue Boy.

"This million-dollar masterpiece is now in your custody," Rodriguez said to O'Shaughnessy. "Don't even touch it, please. Just wait here. This gentleman is taking me to the other stolen pictures. I'll have your partner drive me."

"Come in my car, if you wish," said Johns. "My chauffeur is waiting." Creighton Johns was smiling genially again.

"We'll follow you," said Rodriguez.

"I don't mind this a bit," said the Venice sergeant. "Sort of a private showing, Joe. Have the butler send down a tall beer." O'Shaughnessy sat on the view seat and studied the color of blue, even as any other would-be novelist might do.

A WARM SURGE of success was inside Jose Juan Rodriguez as he sat beside the driver of the prowl car and eyed the lights of the black Woodward limousine ahead. The cars rolled down Wilshire Boulevard towards Santa Monica. From force of habit, he memorized the license number ahead.

Feeling a little on the silly side from the heady reaction to success, Rodriguez said, "Don't arrest him if he runs a red light. I won't turn you in."

Nevertheless, the fun attitude disappeared abruptly after the cars entered Santa Monica city limits, did a left turn, and headed towards Venice. The limousine spurted, went around a slow poke car, and the next thing Rodriguez knew, the prowl car was stopped dead by a traffic light and the

Woodward sped ahead into the next block.

"Better catch up," said Rodriguez. "I hate to admit it, but I don't exactly know where he's going."

The chase was on. Blocks later, the prowl car did catch up—in the parking lot of Hanley's Haven. The chauffeur stood at the grille, wiping chrome with a rag. He said, "Mr. Johns said to tell you he went to Mr. Hanley's office inside."

"Come along with me," Rodriguez said to the prowl car driver. "There could be trouble."

Apparently, though, the atmosphere of this deluxe bar and lounge did not encourage trouble. The place was near-packed, with a line of people at the bar. But voices were subdued and the noise level low.

Rodriguez inquired of the maitre'd where Mr. Hanley's office was located, and proceeded with his companion to the rear and up a flight of half-stairs. He knocked on the door marked *Office,* and opened the door at the same time. No sound came from within. He switched on a light and walked in.

"That's funny," said Rodriguez. "Nobody home."

A king-size walnut office desk was clear of any work materials.

"Hello," Rodriguez called out. He was thinking that there might be a lavatory or a side-room attached. There was no answer.

He sat down on a full-leather davenport, a very rich article of furniture for anybody's bar office. From this vantage point, he spotted a screened alcove at the far end of the room. He arose and pulled the set of screens aside.

Jack-knifed in the corner was the dead body of Mack Rellisso.

Rodriguez knew at once that the man was dead because his legs and arms were stiff, angled in the awkwardness of rigor mortis, and his eye balls were popped out like glass marbles. Dark blood caked his half-sleeve length blue shirt.

So Creighton Johns had just come to this office, supposedly, he considered. But Mack Rellisso had definitely come to this office or been carried in to this office hours before.

Rodriguez took the phone and contacted Venice station, told them to send the meat wagon, Photo Joe and brush men, and throw a net of siren-doused cars around Hanley's Haven. He was told the wagon and crew would have to come in from West Los Angeles. Then he left the prowl car driver in charge and walked casually back through the room full of well-behaved people, and out to the parking lot.

The Woodward limousine was not there.

"How long ago did that big black Woodward drive away?" he asked the parking attendant.

"Mr. Johns's car? A few minutes ago. Quick in, quick out."

Rodriguez flashed his identification. "You know Mr. Johns?" he said.

"Sure. Nice man."

"Did he leave in the car?"

"He did that."

"Thanks, pal," said the detective.

Losing no time, Rodriguez now went back through the lounge, and in the office he again called Venice station, telling them to pick up a black Woodward limousine with the license HEW-633.

It would take a dead wagon five to ten minutes to arrive from West Los Angeles, Rodriguez considered. That meant a slight delay before he would be forced to ring down the curtain on the pleasure of the people in the drinking room. There was nothing he could do now but wait. He left the prowl car driver in Hanley's office.

He took up an empty place at the end of the bar, saying "Bourbon on the rocks," to the bartender.

Something was bugging him to be remembered, he considered as he stood at the bar. It was something that this place had reflexed in his mind. What was it? Yes, of course. The nudes over the bar. The old-fashioned nudes. He looked up. They were gone.

And in that second of knowing that they were gone, he became conscious of two new pictures, one big, about five feet high, and the other one not so big, that flanked the bar. He looked closely and Sari's story in the *Record* and its illustrations came back to him.

Here was 'Pinkie', the Lawrence beauty, and there was 'Lady Hamilton in a Straw Hat,' the pride of George Romney as well as the love of Lord Nelson.

But with the huge publicity attendant to The Great Huntington Heist, slick reproductions were showing up everywhere, Rodriguez considered.

"I see the nudes are gone," he said to the bartender who appeared with the bourbon. "I like 'em better than the new ones."

"Mr. Hanley put 'em up the other day," the bartender said. "For the publicity of it, I guess. They're printing copies of the ones stolen from Huntington."

Joe Rodriguez took another look at the rich gold-leaf frames on these printing copies—and made up his mind about them.

In a few minutes, general commotion sounded from outside. A uniformed policeman, a menacing figure, appeared at the door. Patrons stopped talking and stared around at each other.

"May I have your attention, ladies and gentlemen," Rodriguez spoke out. "We have to take a dead man out of the office back there. Will you kindly leave at once, after settling your checks, of course. Thank you."

To the arriving policeman, he said, "Wait for me. After you get

the body stowed, we're coming out with two paintings."

Rodriguez now had the chance to get in touch with Captain Bert Menelaus. He feared that the veteran would be burned up, purely because his central control had received no recent direct information from him. To counteract anticipated negative feelings, Rodriguez started out fast with the information that all three paintings were accounted for. The tactic failed.

"So what are you doing with them?" the captain acidly interrupted. "Starting a gallery? I want those pictures in my office in ten minutes."

"Okay," said Rodriguez wearily. Then the sense of discipline broke down suddenly within him. "Send a jet airplane to Hanley's parking lot in Venice and stop off on the way back at Casa Blanca."

"What's that?" Menelaus yelled.

"I said the paintings, two of them, are on the way to your office now, sir. From Venice. The third one is leaving Casa Blanca for your office in a few minutes." He then went on gingerly, to bring his superior up to date—and to get permission to stay on the local manhunt for Tim Hanley.

"I wanted you here for the press," Menelaus said grudgingly. "I'll be turning the stuff back to the Huntington people."

Rodriguez thanked him, hung up, and immediately called West Los Angeles station with a message to O'Shaughnessy—to take 'The Blue Boy' in to Captain Menelaus and to handle it with kid gloves.

Rodriguez could well understand the captain's hypertension. Menelaus had been on the hot seat for days. He had a right to unwind a bit. Joe hoped to see him on the front page, framed by priceless art.

Nonetheless, the young detective knew that Rowland, Hanley, and Rosan had to be traced and found quickly, lest they disappear. If they vanished, the heist might become associated in the public mind with the stooges Rellisso, Benes, and various small fry.

It was conceivable that Hugh Rowland might fly back to Europe just as fast as he had returned to America for his grandstand play. His past performance indicated as much. It was also conceivable that Hanley might have collected the $100,000 reward personally from Rowland and turned over his lounge bar to his maitre 'd to operate.

Rodriguez started out with three uniformed officers of LAPD in his commandeered prowl car. He assigned the first man to the Vasque Rosan studio over the grocery store, when he found that place dark and closed up. He assigned the next man to keep watch for Hugh Rowland at Casa Blanca when the butler assured him that

no one—Rowland, Townsend, Johns, or Mrs. Seccolen—was there.

With the third man, Rodriguez drove to Creighton Johns's house. The place was dark, too. The Woodward limousine was not in the garage. He woke the resident family in the servants' quarters over the spreading garage and was told that Mr. Johns instructed them by phone to close the place for a week while he was in Palm Springs.

This last information incensed Rodriguez. He visualized the financier, frightened by the sight of Mack Rellisso's body, skulking out of Hanley's Haven and washing his hands of the fiasco created by Rowland—and running to hiding until the risk of involvement blew over.

Radi Seccolen was now the only traceable person left who might throw some light on Johns's defection and on Rowland's whereabouts.

Rodriguez and his companion drove to the ranch house in Holmby Hills. The Phinxa roadster was parked in the drive. He requested his assistant to park right up behind it and dominate the scene. A police car was at times a psychological factor, he knew. Its presence could keep things on a professional basis and removed from the cozy exchange of half-truths.

Sari came to the door. She took one look at the black and white car with probe lights flashing, and her eyes instantly misted with tears.

"Oh, Joe," she said, "I'm sorry it had to happen this way."

Rodriguez remained silent, not understanding the meaning of the words.

"In there," Sari went on, pointing to a closed door. "Go right in."

The room was a small library-work office combo, Rodriguez saw as he opened the door without knocking.

Radi Seccolen sat at a little desk.

Tim Hanley and Cleburn Townsend occupied chairs directly in front of her.

All seemed shocked. They silently looked up into the flat set of the detective's motionless eyes.

"You are under arrest on suspicion of grand theft," said Rodriguez. "All of you."

Hanley was the only one who did not flinch. A trace of defiance shown in his eyes and was evident in the set of his mouth. At this, Rodriguez casually brushed back his right coat flap, bringing the belt holster and his service pistol into view.

"I suppose you want us to march single file down to the station house," Tim Hanley said mockingly. "Well, I'm not going. You haven't got a search warrant and no right to enter this house. Grand theft, my eye. Townsend here was just working up a press release on

how we got the Huntington portraits back."

"I'm sure it will be interesting reading," said the detective. "You can finish your conference later."

Rodriguez moved back to the door and said to Sari, "Get Lieutenant Bennett of Hollywood Division on the phone for me."

He trained challenging eyes on Tim Hanley and said, "If anybody tries to leave this house, he's resisting an officer—and I'm shooting."

The quick decision to bring Lieutenant Bennett into the case, rather than go on down to the Police Building in Civic Center, was justified, to Joe's way of thinking. At the Police Building, the big show would be the return of the paintings. A questioning session, at which Fred Bennett was a past master, would by necessity be delayed.

Such a delay, Joe was certain, could be avoided; could prevent bail bond lawyers, located close by in Civic Center, appearing and blocking off progress with some complicated maneuver of delay. Bennett's method had reputedly saved the city thousands of dollars in the administration of justice.

"I'll need a cage in a hurry," said Rodriguez to the lieutenant. He gave the address.

The cage car, with its jail-barred rear passenger compartment, was a concession on Rodriguez's part to

Mrs. Seccolen, and this meant to Sari. As for Hanley's feelings in the matter, he did not care if the man was taken in handcuffed in a paddy wagon.

Rodriguez wanted very much to pause and give a small word of reassurance to Sari Seccolen. He wanted to explain why there was no possible way to keep her mother out of the limelight. But there was no time for such niceties. He spent the waiting minutes on the police band, learning that no trace of the Johns' car had shown up.

Rodriguez and his assistant then brusquely herded the three people into the cage and led the jail-on-

wheels through Sunset Boulevard traffic.

Nonetheless, Rodriguez was to have another chance to talk to Sari. He learned this when he saw her at the wheel of the Phinxa, following the cage into the parking lot at De Longpre. The personal reassurance factor had motivated Sari, the detective now realized. Sari understood better than others what an emotion-torn silly goose her mother was; how much her blase mother needed help.

"YOU PEOPLE SHOULD be behind the bars right now, waiting your turn to come to trial," Lieutenant Bennett said, starting off what he always made to appear a casual meeting. "I don't have to remind you that there is no obligation to answer any questions. I would like to emphasize, however, that I'm giving the innocent and uninvolved here a chance to avoid personal hardship and perhaps humiliation. That doesn't apply to you, Hanley, because our print bureau has been working overtime and we've got you nailed."

"Not on Rellisso," Hanley spoke up. "I had nothing to do with anything except trying to get the paintings back from the thieves. Right now I want to exercise my rights and make a telephone call."

"All in due time," said Bennett. "You get that constitutional right after you're booked."

Radi Seccolen and Cleburn exchanged disturbed glances at this remark.

Radi said courteously, "Can my daughter come in here, lieutenant? I need her by my side."

"Of course she can," said Bennett. He nodded to Rodriguez, who opened the door and motioned the waiting Sari Seccolen inside.

In the brief commotion of seating Sari next to her mother, Lieutenant Bennett took Townsend by complete surprise, putting the iron of command in his voice and saying, "Did you cook up the master plan for robbing Huntington, Mr. Townsend?"

"Absolutely not," the man swiftly answered. "I had nothing to do with it. Not a single thing. I first heard of the robbery in London. I know nothing of any master plan or other rigamarole."

Bennett chuckled and continued, "Perhaps you can tell us why it was so easy to convince Hugh Rowland to rush home when the police were obviously making progress and rounding up your hired hands."

Townsend now refused to reply. Radi could not resist filling the vacuum.

"I telephoned to London," she said. "I wanted a worthwhile reward to stimulate action and I got it."

Bennett switched around to confront Hanley and said, "And now

you have the reward stashed away."

"Let's cut the court scene," Hanley said stiffly. "I want my lawyers here."

Two words of Hanley's intrigued Rodriguez: *my lawyers*. "So you have lawyers," he said. "Not one laywer, but batteries of them."

"Who are you, anyway, Hanley?" Bennett followed up. "You run a high-class house in a beatnik neighborhood. You don't even look like a saloon-keeper type to me."

Bennett waited a moment and then drove home with, "We know that you drive a car but haven't a driver's license on file at MVD. We got your fingerprints another way—on a bar glass. We have a feeling your fingerprints are going to show up on Rellisso's belt, exactly where you left them when you held off Rellisso and worked on his gut with the knife."

"Yes, I roughed him up a bit," said Hanley. "But with two hands. No knife. In helping bring the portraits back. But that's all I did. Rellisso walked away on his own power. He had come to shake me down and I gave him more than he bargained for."

Rodriguez began to worry about the way things were going. He knew his boss was a resourceful man, but it was still not clear what Bennett was setting up. Why doesn't he get on Mrs. Seccolen, he wondered. The fact that Hanley was found in her home had deep implications.

Bennett switched back to Townsend, to Rodriguez's irritation.

"Hugh Rowland has not returned to Casa Blanca yet," Bennett said to the man. "Is he on his way back to Europe, leaving you here to try to work yourself out of the mess he created?"

Townsend would not answer. Rodriguez judged that it was not stubbornness in Townsend, but a mounting fright that he would say a wrong thing. Townsend's cheeks rippled with uncontrolled nerve sensations.

Then Rodriguez learned what the veteran detective had been leading up to. Bennett flicked the intercom and said, "Bring in the picture, Ed."

An orderly came in with a manila photo envelope for the lieutenant and departed.

"It was an exciting game, wasn't it?" Bennett said, looking straight at Townsend. "Yes, indeed, quite exciting to be the trusted right arm of a multi-millionaire, a man of mystery and personal power. What does he pay you to front for him? Quarter of a million? Half a million a year? Well, all that money doesn't make up for this, doesn't excuse this kind of thing."

Bennett tapped the photo envelope and continued, "Here's a picture of another bright young

fellow. Not much older than you. Highly educated. Look what happened to him when people operated outside the law."

Lieutenant Bennett ripped open the envelope and shoved an eight by ten inch glossy picture in front of Townsend and Radi Seccolen. Their eyes dilated at the bloody sight of John Bassman, the Yale student researcher, laid out on a morgue slab.

"It's no use, no use," Cleburn Townsend cried. His head drooped into busy hands.

"I say the same," said Radi Seccolen. She stood up, as if to dismiss the whole matter and walk out, woman-like.

Sari pulled her down. Radi continued, "Speak up, Mr. Townsend. Tell them what you know. I don't intend to go to prison for somebody else's mistakes."

"All right," said Bennett. "I'll make it easier on you, Mr. Townsend. Joe, put the cuffs on Hanley and have him taken to Transfer."

Rodriguez got a snarl from his man, but Hanley got the cuffs. In less than half a minute, Joe Rodriguez was back in the room. Bennett motioned Townsend to proceed.

"There is no Hugh Rowland," said Townsend. "There hasn't been for ten years. I'm running the Rowland empire and have been since Hanley put me in charge."

"Hanley?"

"Yes, Hanley, strange as it may seem. Which is all the more reason why Radi and I do not intend to take any terrible raps when we had nothing to do with awful things like this." He nodded to the picture of John Bassman.

"What happened to Hugh Rowland? Did Hanley kill him along the way?"

"It's more complicated than that," said Townsend. He now seemed relieved and on the wistful side. He did not appear an industrial wizard to Rodriguez.

"It's your turn, Radi," Townsend said. "You know about those old goings-on better than I. I'm sure of that."

"I know only a few simple facts," said Mrs. Seccolen. "How can I ever forget them? You are the one who benefited, Cleburn. Say what you have to say."

"To the contrary," said Townsend firmly. "Since I know little about your husband's part in this, I insist that you are the one to speak up."

Radi was defeated and acknowledged it this time, saying, "Perhaps you are right. At any rate, it has been on my mind for years. So now I talk. Now Sari, you, everybody will know what only one other man knows."

"Who is that?" Bennett asked.

"In due time," said Radi lightly.

Out of her view, Rodriguez grinned wryly. Lieutenant Bennett saw the young detective's grin and

coughed to stifle his feelings of exasperation.

"My husband's part in building up the so-called Johns companies has never been known to the public," she said, "but he was the main reason for their success. His patents on processes, machines, and equipment gave them a competitive advantage. There was one man who appreciated my husband's worth and that was Hugh Rowland, a most wonderful man if there ever was one. He used to torment Creighton Johns by constantly referring to the Seccolen-Johns Industries—a name, of course, that never existed."

She stopped to light herself a cigarette. Bennett decided to be patient. Under pressure, his face retained its facade of simple interest.

"So we came to this awful day," Radi went on. "A long time ago it was. For the first time I learned that Carl Seccolen deeply resented what he thought were, well, 'passes' they used to call it, by Creighton at me. We were on Hugh Rowland's cabin cruiser west of Catalina. Hugh, Creighton, my husband, and I. Tim Hanley was the skipper. Tim performed all sorts of odd jobs for Hugh.

"Hugh had met him at a New York club where he was a masseur in charge of the steam room, and brought him back to California at a big salary as a sort of male companion.

"In the evening we started back for San Pedro and everybody was drinking champagne. An argument flared up between Carl and Creighton and got dirty nasty. Hugh tried to stop them but couldn't. Suddenly Carl was struck in the head so hard that he fell to the deck unconscious. When this happened, Hugh became furious. He attacked Creighton.

"All this time I was scared out of my wits. I ran to the protection of Tim Hanley. Hanley couldn't leave the wheel. He shouted a lot but he was out of it. The two of them fought like demons, swinging champagne bottles at each other. Hugh lunged at Creighton and tackled him hard. They went over the side and the cruiser sailed on. Hanley circled back. It was dark. They could not be found. We saw shark fins cutting the water. We tried but we could not find them and when we—"

Lieutenant Bennett could stand this story no longer. He interrupted, saying, "What was Johns doing then, the other night, when Rodriguez talked to him?"

"That was Hanley. Tim Hanley in his grey-hair wig. Otherwise you know Hanley for his natural grey crew-cut."

FRED BENNETT looked fiercely at Rodriguez—and the young detective stared back with an utterly blank face. There was no way for Joe to stop proceedings and con-

vey to the lieutenant that the native acting ability as well as false hair of the man had figured in the Tim Hanley performance.

"An unlikely story," said Townsend, "but absolutely true. I should know. I was the vice-president—quite young then, I might add—that he and Radi picked to run the Hugh Rowland empire, incognito as it were. By decisions of my own to autonomous divisional heads who carried out everything themselves.

"Actually, it's all been quite legal. If I hadn't agreed to take over, a major financial crash would have occurred. I never signed Hugh Rowland's name once. I issued press releases about him, of course, but—"

"For ten long years?" Rodriguez said, frankly skeptical.

"Name one appearance in court, or otherwise in the public view, that Hugh Rowland made in that time. Fortunately, Mr. Rowland was an older man and had few living relatives. Those who sued for this or that reason were settled with generously, out of court by our lawyers."

"How did a Mr. Hugh Rowland just the other day fly to the United States with you?" Rodriguez asked.

"An old trick very well known to people in high places," said Townsend. "A reasonable facsimile of what people expect Mr. Rowland to look like flew to Canada with me on a commercial airliner, then flew to California with me in a corporation plane. His attendance thus satisfied the servants and guards who never had met the real Mr. Rowland in their lives.

"That trusted flying companion is an assistant of mine, incidentally, in London. An older and discreet gentleman whose services are invaluable. You see, I'm telling you everything. I realize that I have to, if I want to escape rotting away in prison."

"And this man Hanley," said Bennett. "His interests were naturally on the plain side, so how did he manage to bluff out being the lost Mr. Johns, the last of a famous California family? Let's say for the moment that I can swallow the Rowland deception maybe, but this Johns masquerade is something else again. It's impossible."

"My husband wanted it that way," said Mrs. Seccolen coolly. "Carl was about to lose every cent we had. At that time it was not generally known but the Johns companies were ready to topple. A front was necessary. Since it worked with the Rowland enterprises, why not with Johns? We took that calculated chance.

"The blow my husband received from Creighton Johns caused injuries that just wouldn't heal. He died a year and a half after the fight on the cruiser. By then, Tim Hanley was generally accepted as

Creighton Johns, living in his home. On rare occasions he acted the part. I saw to it that he didn't make any *faux pas.*"

"Well, this is all very fantastic and fabulous," said Bennett. "You could sell it, maybe, to Hollywood for a movie. But right now I want to tell you I don't believe it. I'll tell you why. Here was a mountain of cash money at your disposal, all the steady production of dividends and coupons. So why would Tim Hanley take it upon himself to contact the top level underworld and plan a robbery that cost him thousands and thousands of dollars to execute?"

Radi Seccolen flipped up her hands in disgust. She said, "You may find it difficult to understand, lieutenant, but a person can get tired of money as such, when he has too much of it and no real purpose in life. Tim Hanley didn't have to run a bar, of course, but that's what he did for a while to satisfy his ego, to be free of other confinements. He was a success at it, too. It made up for his lonely life as Creighton Johns. Unfortunately, he got tired of being two men. He became wrapped up in the Johns side of his life. He became interested in art and loved the prestige of being known as a collector—"

"But he had enough money to buy paintings," said Rodriguez. "Why, then, would a big-time collector steal?"

"You just don't know paintings, young man," she said. "You confuse them with the art of movies or photographs. The greatest and rarest paintings can strangely overpower a person's sense of balance, affect his brain, and drive him to do things that are quite decidedly unnatural."

"An artist's brain, perhaps," said Rodriguez, "but not a saloonkeeper's, not a man like Tim Hanley who had nudes on his walls."

Sari broke in, saying, "They were nudes, but unusual nudes, let me tell you. I saw them once. They are French masterpieces of the kind painted on secret commission by accomplished artists for sporting gentlemen. Hanley must have paid ten thousand each for them."

"The correct figure is thirty-seven thousand dollars each," said Townsend. "They were post-Napoleonic. I paid the dealer in French francs. The sale was never publicized."

"It's all very simple," said Radi. "Tim Hanley was cracking up. He's not the first wealthy man it's happened to. He had everything and could buy almost anything he wanted. He felt infinitely superior in his own way to the few people he allowed to be his friends. He began challenging the world. Making his own rules. Some rich men have made their own rules in other ways, like setting up a mistress and defying the marriage convention

openly. He chose to defy the laws of the land."

But Bennett was still not entirely convinced. He said, "Posting a reward is not exactly defying the law." The statement was a throwaway, to keep the woman talking. It worked.

"Hanley offered the ten thousand reward so he could keep close tabs of what the police were doing," she said carelessly.

"Which puts you right in the middle of the whole thing," Bennett rammed in. "Otherwise, how would you know what Hanley's motives were?"

"Oh, but that's untrue," Radi cried.

"You had to be in the middle of things," said Bennett. "The first reward could have been his idea, as you just said. But increasing the reward was your idea—to get him out of the danger he was in when police caught up so fast. The hundred thousand was actually a payoff ransom to the theft ring, wasn't it? And when Johns, that is, Hanley, refused you, you conned him out of it by a subtle threat—the threat of digging up the past.

"You said you would telephone to a man you—and he—knew to be long dead. You bet that Townsend would make your sale for you, by phoning back to Hanley and asking him to go along with you for safety's sake."

"What else could I advise Hanley," said Townsend. "He was on thin ice. The police net was closing in, principally because Hanley had evidently put faith in this ring of hoodlums to do his work for him without a slip-up. I say 'evidently' because I knew absolutely nothing of this so-called Great Heist until I read about it in the papers."

"But you," said Rodriguez to Townsend, "came back in a big hurry to protect that big reward that you had temporarily approved of. You intended to see that Tim Hanley would get his own reward money back. You decided it was better that way. You wanted him to break off his traffic with the criminals. No one would be the wiser. Huntington would get its paintings. Everybody would be happy. You'd be more happy than most, being rid of the mess."

"On second thoughts," said Townsend abjectly, "that was my sole error—ever to worry about one hundred thousand dollars when hundreds of millions were at stake."

An orderly came in and deposited a notebook on Lieutenant Bennett's desk. Rodriguez could see from his distance that the writing was in a crude scrawl. Bennett looked up from his reading of it and grinned at Mrs. Seccolen.

"You should frame this document, Mrs. Seccolen," he said. "Hang it on a wall for you and Sari to look at. It may take you off the hook. Briefly, Tim Hanley in-

sisted on making a statement."

Lieutenant Bennett read from the notebook, " 'The Detroit fellow they call The Man he came out and got Rellisso so he would not sing. The man got Vasque Rosan for same reason. You find Rosan under the paintings in his studio. Radi had nothing to do with robbery. Did not know about it. She bugged me about Huntington paintings. Something I could never own, never touch. I never admit defeat. I got them for her. Prove to her. I know I am finished. I don't care so much. Keep Townsend on job. Good man. Hugh Rowland would have wanted it that way. It was his outfit, not mine. Hugh was a wonderful man. Timothy J. Hanley'."

Bennett looked up and said, "That's what you might call a confession. Now, how do you feel, Miss Seccolen?"

"I feel like mother and I ought to celebrate," Sari said. "I can't tell you how relieved I am. Tim Hanley wasn't such an old meany after all."

"Well," said Rodriguez, "it's a matter of opinion."

Rodriguez was plainly brooding now, thinking of the roughed-up, bound guards; the slain scholar; Len Benes, beaten and dying a lingering death; Mack Rellisso, rubbed out to preserve the domination of a segment of the underworld; Vasque Rosan liquidated.

Lieutenant Bennett observed Rodriguez's face, troubled and uncertain for a healthy young man, and said by way of changing the mood, "Well, Joe, they say art is long and time is fleeting. I guess you better shag down to Captain Menelaus and make your report."

"Yes, sir," said the young detective. "But this is all they'll be interested in. Stolen goods recovered. Three pictures. Value unknown. Suspect T. J. Hanley, confessed.

"The rest will end up in File Thirteen, lieutenant. That is, unless we drag Palm Springs for a possible Creighton Johns, unless we extradite the Rowland double in London, unless the D.A. rules in the matter of collusion on the part of Mrs. Seccolen."

"No doubt you're right, Joe," said Lieutenant Fred Bennett. "But your hands are tied for the moment and so are mine until the D.A. and the Grand Jury get in the act. If they do, that is. Maybe there is a Hugh Rowland still around somewhere. Maybe he'll pop up again—like in Brisbane, Australia, dodging a process server."

Rodriguez looked briefly at Sari as he walked out of the office on his way to the squad room. Her amber eyes said only one thing this time, appraisal. Not approval. He thought how much her dark amber eyes resembled those of Lady Hamilton beneath that lady's straw hat.

FLOWERS FOR A CORPSE

by PETER OPPENHEIM

The floral tribute seemed quite touching . . . until it tightened into a noose around a killer's throat.

•

COUNTY DETECTIVE Gary Parnell cocked a bored eye at the big round clock as he answered the phone. It was pure habit to note the time, one of the hangovers of his FBI training years before, and it had never meant a thing in the solving of a county case. Yet the clock was meticulously synchronized with Arlington every day, and Parnell noted the time whenever a call came in.

It was now eighteen minutes after six.

"Detective Parnell," he said.

He could hear hard breathing over the wire. Then a voice, a bare hoarse whisper forced through muscular tension, "Parnell, this is J. C. Thomas. I want to report the murder of my wife."

Parnell stood very still, his hand tightening on the phone.

"At home?"

"Yes. I'm here now."

Parnell spoke again sharply, but there was no answer. Yet the line was open. After a space, he recognized the sound of the phone thudding on the carpet. *So he finally did her in,* he thought.

He'd half expected this, ever since Thomas had gotten to running with that streamlined blonde divorcee who lived on Mullberry Road. Thomas' wife had been a bedridden invalid for years, and although he had a fairly profitable printing business of his own in the city, the real money was hers.

"Well, now he's got his freedom and the money—until he gets the blonde," Parnell said to Sergeant Frank Grazzatti as they drove out.

"You don't figure he did it?" Grazzalti asked.

The detective shot an impatient glance at the man at his side.

"What's that got to do with it? "The people of this county have never yet convicted a man on circumstantial evidence. He'll have an alibi a mile long, and he's smart enough to stick to it."

Parnell turned through the big stone gates of Pine Grove and wound through the sizeable properties of the elite section. The lights were on throughout the fourteen-room Thomas house. J. C. Thomas stood waiting in the door, still a wiry, athletic man in spite of a balding hairline. He had ripped his tie and collar loose and he looked dazed. He held a highball glass half filled in one hand.

He gestured them into the house, closed the front door and said hoarsely, "Upstairs in her bedroom."

Parnell and the sergeant passed upstairs. Martha Thomas lay in a blood-soaked bed literally hacked to pieces, yet for all the gruesome horror, she looked oddly peaceful.

"Don't look like she fought much," Grazzatti said.

Parnell said nothing. He had paled a little and his face was set in tight lines.

He looked around the room. Every drawer in the place had been pulled out, every picture and mirror ripped off its hangar. One of the balcony windows had been forced open. Beneath it was a pool of shattered glass from a broken pane.

Parnell glanced in the bathroom. It was in order, but the other rooms on that floor and the whole downstairs had been ransacked.

"Looks like a robbery," Grazzatti said.

"Yeah. It looks it," Parnell nodded. "Call the coroner and get

the fingerprint and photography boys out here."

He returned to the ransacked living room where Thomas stood at a window, his glass empty now. Parnell said, "Pretty terrible, Mr. Thomas, and my sympathies. But I'll have to bother you for details."

Thomas made a choked sound, then straightened his shoulders and said hollowly, "That's quite all right."

"I could begin with the maid, and give you a breathing space."

"It's her day off. They probably knew that."

"They?"

Thomas turned with a desolate gesture. "Maybe only one. I only actually saw one."

Parnell then noticed a darkening bruise on Thomas' forehead, which had also begun to swell. "Perhaps you'd just better tell me the story."

Thomas nodded, looked at his empty glass for an instant, and then went to a cellarette to mix himself another highball. He carried it back to the mantle, nervously lit a cigarette, and exhaled a deep draw of smoke.

"I came home on the usual train," he began. "It gets in at five fifty-six. I have a regular order for flowers for my wife—" He stopped to blow his nose. "On the maid's day off I always brought her a bouquet. Just a sentiment. I get a light supper for us myself and take up the tray, and it gives her—used to give her—a little lift to see the flowers."

"You get them at Schlacht's?"

"Yes. It took no more than half a minute. They were ready. When I got here, the front door was bolted on the inside and there were too many lights on in the house. I knew the back door was bolted."

"Did you try any of the windows?"

Thomas shook his head. "The maid's pretty careful about locking up the day before her day off. I would have had to break in, and I had the feeling that something was wrong. If somebody was in the house, I didn't want to give them warning."

"Quick thinking, Mr. Thomas. But you did get in."

Thomas took a drink and a deep breath and stiffened himself again. "Naturally my first thought was of my wife. If there was going to be trouble, I didn't want her used as a shield or hostage. So I ran around to the side of the house and climbed a trellis to her balcony. I could hear banging noises in the house, but there was nobody in her room. It looked—" He choked up, and turned to sob against the mantle.

"It looked as we saw it?" Parnell said softly. "Then you broke in by the French window?"

Thomas nodded, and got himself in hand. "I could see she was dead and I was horrorstruck. For a few minutes, I suppose I went

crazy. As you may have noticed, Martha kept a lot of knicknacks around. One was a small marble figure and I grabbed it and ran out into the hall to find the killer."

"He was upstairs?"

"Yes, he came out of some room—my room, I think—and we collided in the hallway. Maybe I was off balance or too wild. I swung and missed and he must have jerked me forward, so that I struck myself with the statue as I fell."

"It's still on the hall floor," Parnell said.

Thomas put his fingers to his forehead, winced as he pressed the bruise. "It dazed me. I don't think for long. I heard a car start and roar out the drive. When I got downstairs the front door was open."

"Where did he have his car parked, Mr. Thomas?"

"Must have been in the parking bay or I'd have seen it when I drove in." He finished his drink, and shakily lit another cigarette.

"I don't know what's missing. We never kept really large sums of cash, but he must have been looking for a safe. Maybe he had us mixed up with the wealthy Thomasses down the line. He must have tried to make Martha tell where the safe was, and of course, she couldn't. We don't have one."

He broke suddenly into a tight, raw, whimpering sound and turned again to sob against the mantle.

"Just take it easy, Mr. Thomas," Parnell said, sympathetically. I'll be right back."

Parnell went outside and around the house. It was dusk now and he used his flashlight. There were traces of footprints in the flowerbed below the balcony. They were a man's prints, and Parnell felt sure they had been made by Thomas.

He circled out by the parking bay and threw his flash across the gravel. A fast starting car had gouged furrows very recently, but he doubted if there would be any tire marks. The tires had not dug through into dirt.

He stood a moment staring at the house. "It's a good story—not too much and not too little," he thought. "And the Random Thomases do keep a lot of cash around. It could have been mistaken identity. A one-man deal would be a sneak, probably a hophead, and nervous. Those stabs looked like a

switchblade size. He could be telling the truth. Maybe I was wrong to suspect him.

But I don't think so."

He strolled around Thomas' car, which was parked in front of the door ahead of Parnell's. The engine was cold now, but heat had lingered under the hood. A lot of heat for the short drive from the station. He looked at the tires. No noticeable scuff. Thomas had come home in a hurry, though. There were brake marks in the gravel. But then, just seeing all the lights might have made him speed.

Headlights turned in the drive, and Parnell stood waiting. It was Doc Hetting, the coroner. Parnell went upstairs with him and asked, "What do you make of her position?"

"She died easy," Doc said.

"First stab? Could she have been asleep?"

"We'll have to autopsy," the coroner said. "It may tell nothing."

Hetting ran his stubby index finger in a pattern above the stab wounds. "That throat wound counted. Most of the rest don't even make sense."

"Could they have been made first, in a vicious attempt to force information out of her."

"Yes, they could have," Hetting said, nodding.

Parnell looked incensed. He glared at the coroner. "And she'd have still died quiet like that? In that quiet position? There's hardly been a reflex!"

"Sometimes it's the reflex that puts them in the quiet position," Doc Hetting said. "Particularly with people who have endured almost unbearable torment for some time. It's as if, in the last instant of life, the mind had a vision of eternal peace and composed the body. At that point there'd be no more fight, no more feeling of pain. For some—no more terror."

"You bust me up," Parnell said.

Doc Hetting shrugged. "Maybe the autopsy can show whether she was asleep or not—or whether the supplementary wounds came before or after the lethal stroke. But don't count on it. A smart lawyer could rip that evidence to shreds."

Parnell swore and moved out to the landing to think over what Hetting had said. Sergeant Frank Grazzati joined him.

Grazzatti said, "He couldn't have torn up the house like this in the time before he phoned, if he'd caught his regular train."

"You're getting smart," Parnell grunted. "So all we have to do is find out if he was on the most crowded train of the evening."

"He was on it," Grazzatti said. "He sat in the last smoker and so did Jim Stover. I phoned Jim to check. Jim got off a few passengers behind him."

Parnell looked as if he'd been hit. "Stover sure?"

"He couldn't be any surer. He

called to him and was miffed that Thomas didn't answer, but he said the Earthbound was rattling in and maybe Thomas didn't hear him.

"There's still something wrong," Parnell growled. "To hell with you. You, and Doc too." He moved back downstairs. In the hall, he paused and stared at the small square florist box on the entry table.

"Flowers for the dead," he thought. It touched him. It touched him deeply. He went back to the living room. Thomas stood motionless at the window where he'd first found him.

"Looks like your guess hits the nail on the head, Mr. Thomas," he said. "They expected to find a chunk of cash, all right. They sure looked for it."

Thomas didn't answer.

Parnell moved about the room examining the way drawers had been jerked out and spilled, shoving a few back automatically. He picked up a marble electric clock that a drawer had caught and jerked from the wall. It had stopped at five twenty-seven.

He frowned at it. He thought, "The killer would have bound or killed Martha Thomas before a wild job like this. Then he probably would have looked first for valuables and a hidden safe upstairs. But if he was down here at five twenty-seven, what was he doing back upstairs at around six ten or fifteen?"

Then he thought, "That alibies Thomas, if he was on the five fifty-six. Jim Stover's a reliable man and if he says Thomas was on the train that pretty well clinches it. But why didn't Thomas hear him call?"

He tried to picture the rumble of the Eastbound pulling in. It was a train of usually empty cars that would side for the night at Monmouth, the next town toward the city, and it made a clatter, no getting around that. But not that much noise, unless a man had something on his mind.

And then he thought, "Unless a man were hurrying to catch that train back to Monmouth. It's only four minutes."

He looked suddenly, sharply, at Thomas' back. He said, "Well, Mr. Thomas, this is a bad time to bother you. But if you'd drive downtown and give a deposition while it's all still fresh, it will help the investigation."

"Of course," Thomas agreed with a dull voice and turned to join Parnell at the hall doorway.

Parnell turned to Sergeant Grazzatti. "Okay, Frank, let's go." Moving out through the hall, Parnell picked up the box of flowers, and held them out toward Thomas. "You may want these for your wife's funeral."

Thomas stopped and looked at the place from which Parnell had picked up the flowers. His face blanched. He looked at Parnell

and saw the grim accusation in his eyes.

Parnell said, "Man climbing a trellis and getting knocked dizzy wouldn't carry flowers clear back downstairs with him, would he? He'd lay them down here after coming in the front door—*which was bolted from inside!*"

"I don't know what you're getting at," Thomas said tightly. "I don't know how the flowers got there. Maybe I picked them up when I opened the door."

"You were the killer, Thomas," Parnell said. "You killed her before you ever left home."

Thomas jerked back against the door, his eyes wild. "How could I be? I was on the train. Somebody must have seen me. Your autopsy can pin down the time of death."

"Not that close, and certainly not that close with an invalid," Parnell said. "Death could have occurred say, about an hour earlier. Time enough for you to shower fast and change clothes and drive to Monmouth, park your car and catch the commuter back here. The train back to Monmouth would be coming in empty with the conductor busy checking his day's tickets. All you had to do was stand on the platform, race your car back from Monmouth and phone me to report what had happened here on your maid's day off. All the dirty work was already done, and you'd set up your alibi."

"You'll never make that stick!" Thomas shrilled.

"I'll make it stick," Parnell said. "And I'll prove your wife was murdered in her sleep and that you desecrated her corpse to make it look good. And brother, for this kind of deal, you'll burn."

His face was grim.

Thomas stared at him wildly, and then at the box of flowers. Then he sank slowly down the door, and this time, his sobs were real.

Parnell looked at the flowers a second then laid them back upon the entrance table.

"You should have left them in the car," he said.

A NEW COMPLETE MIKE SHAYNE NOVELET NEXT MONTH

Art and commercial enterprise can be worlds apart. But then again . . .

a matter of integrity

by PAUL W. FAIRMAN

THE NEIGHBORS would have been surprised had they known who really lived in the little white cottage three houses from the corner; who the colorless, self-effacing old couple really were.

But even if the facts had been known they probably would not have been accepted as truth. It would have been too difficult to transpose scowling, old, white-haired Carl Sharp into a darkly handsome young artist wielding a

brush in a Paris garret; and almost impossible to see hat-rackish Laura Sharp posed nude and alluring in that same garret.

But these *were* the facts. Laura had been Carl's first model—but so long ago—and now they were merely examples of what can happen when time and defeat join hands to do a job.

An art lover with a long memory might possibly have recalled Carl Sharp. A few had—but only through an association that was the key to Carl's bitterness.

"—Sharp—Sharp? The name rings a bell. I tie him in somehow with Vincent Blake."

Once, that name had made Carl's eyes flash fires of scorn. But time had passed and the fires had faded into an angry glow. His bellowing, "Blake? That opportunist?" had receded with the lowered tides of vitality into an acid summing up of Blake as a man and an artist: "Blake? No integrity. Absolutely none. And stupid. The one smart thing he did was to die at forty-five."

Carl Sharp had known Blake well. They'd done the Left-Bank bit together after World War I. And they had done it well—fulfilled every obligation asked of the restless rebel talent that quit the land of Babbitt and fled to the exciting arms of Mother Paris.

They ate bread and cheese as they stared morosely out at the inscrutable Seine. They sat long hours at the little sidewalk tables, condemning, pitying, and drinking wine. They lured models to their garrets with promises of money, slept with them, and then stood them up and painted them.

They were rivals from the spirit right down to the flesh, Carl Sharp having married Laura only to keep her out of Vincent Blake's arms.

And how they had painted! They had painted and destroyed and painted and destroyed and painted and painted and painted.

And to what end? The appraisal of the critics:

"—Carl Sharp? Good technician—no doubt of that—meticulous—great integrity—but—"

That cruel, heart-rending *but*.

"—Vincent Blake? Rather startling—shocks you with color—laughs at form but makes it obey him—"

So Carl Sharp fulfilled all the requirements and got all the rewards except the important one.

Success.

And when there was absolutely no doubt that destiny had not selected Carl, he ate the last bit of mouldy cheese, told Laura to put her clothes back on, and recrossed the ocean to make his peace with Babbitt.

It turned out to be more of an armed truce on Carl's part, with Babbitt not caring much one way or another. But the years passed and finally there was the little

white cottage, Carl's basement sanctuary, Laura's shrewd jousting with the economic laws of survival, and a kind of bleak happiness withal.

And a timid little ad in the appropriate section of the Sunday paper:

FOR SALE: An authentic Vincent Blake. Apply to Carl Sharp. 21 Avery Street.

The man who applied was well-dressed and quite curious. His name was Kenneth Partridge and he'd hurried out in order to get there first.

He sat in the neat little parlor with his cane between his knees and opined mentally that this seemed the most improbable place on earth to find an authentic Blake. But then—you could never tell.

"Sharp—Sharp," he said. "The name seems to ring a bell."

Carl glowered and waited. Laura, speaking timidly, said, "We knew Vincent—"

Carl turned accusing eyes on his wife. "Yes. Mrs. Sharp knew him *very* well."

Mr. Partridge brightened and snapped his fingers. "Of course. I read Blake's biography. Why, you're *the* Carl Sharp."

Mr. Partridge didn't know it, but he was treading on dangerous ground. Laura sought to bridge him off from it by saying: "We've had the Blake a long time. We don't like to part with it—"

"I don't mind parting with it in the least," Carl stated.

Laura's eyes said, *Please, Carl,* as she went on: "—but things are a little bad with us right now and we decided—"

"Could I see the painting?" Mr. Partridge asked.

"Of course. I'll get it."

While Laura was gone, Mr. Partridge tried to melt the frost that lay over everything. He didn't understand why it was there, but he tried to melt it anyhow.

"I've always admired Blake," he said.

"A man of absolutely no integrity," Carl Sharp said. "He had

only contempt for his medium. He scorned technique. He laughed at the critics who praised him. He slapped paint around with the ridiculous abandon of a cynic in a sign painter's shop."

Mr. Partridge stared in bemused wonder. "But he had great talent."

Carl's poised explosion was throttled by the arrival of Laura with the painting. She glanced about fearfully, as though looking for blood on the furniture, and set the canvas so that it caught the light from the window. The painting really didn't appear to be much at first glance. A Paris skyline of absurdly tilted roof-tops, and angular windows. One had the feeling that the whole thing would tumble into a heap at any moment.

But Mr. Partridge was enchanted. "Beautiful," he murmured.

"Worthless," Carl Sharp snorted.

Mr. Partridge didn't seem to hear. "The fragile symbolism he achieved. The subtle touches of color." Mr. Partridge sighed. "Too bad he had to die."

"Smartest thing he ever did."

Mr. Partridge either ignored or did not hear the comment. He got up and approached the painting. He unscrewed his cane and removed what turned out to be a small magnifying glass. He peered through it at the painting from all angles. Finally, he straightened, screwed his cane back together, and put on what was obviously his shrewd face.

"Of course there are quite a few authentic Blakes around," he said.

"Then go buy them."

"Carl, please! We need the—"

"But this one is—well, it's hard to put into words." He glanced at Laura. "How much are you asking?"

Her scrawny throat worked as though reminding her that food cost money. "Four thousand?"' she said timidly.

"You're being cheated," Carl snapped.

But Mr. Partridge ignored him. He smiled brilliantly at Laura. "We won't quibble," he said. "Four thousand it is. Will you take my check? I can furnish ample identification."

"Oh, yes," Laura said gratefully. "Your check will be quite all right."

LAURA AND CARL didn't speak to each other for quite a while after Mr. Partridge left with the Blake. Carl paced the floor and glowered and finally disappeared.

Laura had two cups of tea and then went down into the basement. Carl was standing in front of a canvas. He was putting careful, meticulous marks on it with a black pencil.

"Carl—"

"Yes?"

"Do you think you might work a little faster on this one?"

Carl whirled on his wife as though she had just splashed paint on an El Greco. *"Faster?"*

"But Carl—prices are going up. Four thousand isn't much when you have to spread it over eighteen months."

He turned and skewered her with eyes that could still flash fire on occasion.

"Laura, once and for all! I'll not compromise any art. I am a man of integrity. The painting will be finished when it's *done*—and not one minute sooner. Is that understood? Money in itself means nothing to me."

"Yes, Carl," Laura said meekly and went upstairs to bring Carl a cup of tea.

Next Issue's Complete MIKE SHAYNE Novelet

THE GOOD CITIZEN

by BRETT HALLIDAY

Bad citizens gave Shayne more trouble than good. But both could be tied in very closely with violence and death.

Murder the Leader

The slain musician's name was on millions of records . . . and lettered in red on the bullet lodged in his brain.

by MICHAEL AVALLONE

SWINGING SAUL Smith was the hottest jazz combo leader in the country when somebody cooled him. The cooling was done an hour after Smith had left the jammed precincts of Carnegie Hall on April Fool's Day. It was all so simple that Captain Michael Monks of Homicide was kidded from the start.

Smith had waved goodbye at Stage Door to a thousand screaming, waving teenagers, stepped into his firehouse red Cadillac and driven home to his apartment in Tudor City. But the Caddy never reached Tudor City. It was found, hours later, its front wheels sluiced onto the sidewalk in front of Carl Schurz Park, with Smith slumped over the onyx wheel. 'Swinging Saul' would swing no more. Someone had blown the back of his head off with a .357 Magnum no more than a cigarette length away.

The world of jazz mourned. Nobody but nobody had played New Orleans music on a slide trombone like Swinging Saul. The world of Homicide gritted its official teeth and dug in. Murder One attracts little attention when it happens to John Smith but when a Show Busi-

ness Smith is shot down in cold blood the glare of newspaper and TV coverage is blinding. Everything the cops do comes in for scrutiny, criticism and analysis.

Days went by, lengthening into weeks, and the law's inability to bring the killer of a jazz great to heel, put everybody down at Centre Street in a wonderful frame of mind. The D.A.'s office rolled out a carpet that wasn't red, and put every police chief and captain of detectives on it.

Mike Monks occupied a large portion of that carpet. The murder had occurred in his precinct, right in the heart of concrete Manhattan. The first steps had been simple ones. The murder weapon belonged to Swinging Saul—a gift from a U.S. General on Smith's last USO tour through Vietnam—and it was found on the expensively-upholstered back seat of the Caddy.

No prints of course. Smith's private life was remarkably clean and regulated. No mistresses, no wives, no children, no girls. He was a lay minister in his spare time, devoted to charity and the welfare of his own race. His funeral, three days after the murder, was one of the largest and most sincere ever witnessed in Harlem.

Nowhere could Monks find a reasonable suspect. Swinging Saul's combo included Taps Terry on drums, Roger Bright on piano and Henry Beaver on trumpet. All of them loved Smith like a father. All three of them wept at the funeral like kids finding out there was no Santa Claus.

The whole universe of Jazz Music mourned. Carl Calendar, Smith's white manager, posted a ten thousand-dollar reward, for any information leading to the capture of the Magnum killer. This didn't make Monks feel any better. The inference was clear that the law would need an informer or a stoolie to do their work. Broadway threw a benefit *Requiem For Swinging Saul* which drew fifty thousand dollars for a charity named in Smith's will.

On the third week of futility, Monks dropped into my office for a smoke and a talk. He was more tired-looking than usual and his forehead had corrugated like a washboard.

"What do you know about Smith, Ed?" he asked almost desperately as he chain-smoked a caravan of Camels.

"I'm not much on jazz music, Mike, but I'd have to have lived in Siberia not to know that Smith was up there with Satchmo in class. His last record *Jason D.* is still a big seller all over the country. Ever hear it? Real cool."

"Yeah," Monks agreed drily. His Music Appreciation had stopped with Stephen Foster. "Dammit, I hate cases like this. Not a lead anywhere."

"No *cherchez la femme?*"

Monks squinted. "Smith was an angel. Not a whisper of dames. Oh, enough of them wanted to marry him, I hear, but there isn't any of them that would have killed him because he said nix. No, Ed. This man was a living saint. So help me. I don't usually believe that about anybody. Experience tells me everybody has something to hide. But this Smith was the goods. I got fifty affidavits and a thousand character witnesses to prove it."

"How about his manager? Carl Calendar. They usually know their people better than anybody. He have anything to tell you? You mine for information where there's a payload."

Monks wagged his big head, his old eyes like a watchdog's. "Calendar is as busted up about this as anyone I've ever seen. No luck there. He'd pay that ten grand in five minutes if I had a lead."

"Calendar," I said aloud. "Is that his real name?"

Monks grinned, as beat as he was. "No, it's *Calenducci.* How'd you guess?"

"Show business," I said. "Nobody's born with a name like Calendar."

"Well," Monks said, stubbing the last Camel in the ashtray on my desk, "you think about it if you're not too busy. After all, you could earn ten G's if you came up with something. It's not as though I'm asking you to work for nothing. If you're not on a case, think about it."

"Sure thing, Mike. Anything for the Department."

"I'll bet," he grimaced and shouldered out the door, waving to Melissa Mercer as he passed. My secretary waved back. When the door closed behind him, I thought about it.

A long time. But it was no use. All my mind was filled with was the haunting, cool rhythms of *Jason D.* That and the soul-searing voice of Swinging Saul Smith's slide trombone. It was a damn shame all right. Who the hell would want to blast the head of a saint off its shoulders?

II

I WENT DOWN to *The Slipper Club* that night. The Slipper is a gold-roped palace that showcases the best that popular American music has to offer. Swinging Saul Smith's combo was playing an engagement there. A requiem was more like it. There was no one on the slide trombone but the jazz buffs were there in force to honor the drums, the piano, the trumpet and the vacant trombone spot.

Smith's music stand had a baby spot on it all through the performance. Moans of ecstasy and sorrow permeated the smoky atmosphere of the club. It was a trifle weird.

After the ten o'clock perform-

ance, I went backstage to see the boys. Taps Terry, Roger Bright and Henry Beaver. The trio, bereft of their leader, sat around on cane chairs before their bulb-bordered dressing mirrors and eyed me as if I weren't there. It figured. I smelled like copper and even though I was on their side, I was one of the gents who couldn't capture Swinging Saul's killer.

Taps Terry was lanky, bony, with fingers like spatulas. His dark eyes flashed over me suspiciously. "Fuzz have any luck yet?"

"No, but they're working overtime," I said. "Give them a break."

"Break?" Roger Bright, a fullback-sized Negro, snorted. "Nobody gave The Swinger a break, did they? Shot him from behind."

"Easy, Rog," chimed in Henry Beaver, a studious, bespectacled trumpet if ever there was one. "That kind of talk doesn't help anyone. This boy is a detective. He'll find the right key pretty soon and we'll all rest a lot easier."

"That's right, Henry," I said. I looked at all three of them, understanding the raw misery in their souls. "Look. You didn't play *Jason D.* tonight. How come?"

Taps Terry laughed harshly. "Man, haven't you heard enough of that platter? They wear it out all day on WNEW."

"Sure," Roger Bright agreed. "We figure to ease off on it a little. Folks that come here probably got the record anyhow. Leastways, nobody requests it."

Henry Beaver threw a reproving glance at his combo pals. He shook his head.

"Noon," he said thickly. "That's not exactly a straight story. Fact is, we pulled Jason D. out of the repertoire."

"Any particular reason?" I asked.

"Yes." He stared at me, daring me to think he was foolish. "It was Saul's last original composition. Kind of his Swan Song, now. We hate that piece now. Maybe it reminds us too much of what we lost—"

I left a little after that, thanking them for their co-operation, and went out to the bar for a drink. The club had filled up some and soft cocktail-type music was filtering out from somewhere—a semi-discotheque arrangement that most of the clubs were giving into. I was halfway down the right side of a fine Martini, soberly studying the

couples mixing frugs and Watusis on the dance floor, when a voice at my elbow said: "I understand you saw the boys. Fine bunch of fellows, aren't they?"

"The best," I agreed, swiveling on my stool. "Loyalty is a fine emotion in anybody." The man next to me on another stool, was monk's-cowl bald with pleasant eyes and a smile that lit up his whole moon face.

"You're Ed Noon, aren't you?" he asked.

"Guilty," I said. "You wouldn't be Carl Calendar, would you?"

He nodded morosely at that. "A Captain Monks told me if you were to come around, not to run you off as a busybody. I'm glad everybody's working on this thing."

"A lot of people are interested, Mr. Calendar. Saul was loved the way Babe Ruth was by baseball fans."

"Amen to that. Can I buy you a drink, Mr. Noon?"

"No thanks. You could answer a question or two, though."

"Be glad to. Anything to catch that—" He started to say an unprintable word, thought better of it and drained a tall amber drink set down before him on the polished bar. A riff of jazz music started up behind him and there was a smattering of applause. The boys were coming on for their second show of the night.

"I'm interested in *Jason D,*" I told him.

He blinked. "Come again?"

"The boys tell me it was an original composition. But it's such an odd title for a piece of music. I mean—Jason who? Jason and the Argonauts or what? It is a dedication piece of some kind, isn't it?"

Carl Calendar regarded me closely. "What an odd question. You know jazz people—they call their numbers all crazy kinds of names. Look at *Stealing Apples, Muskrat Ramble.* I could go on for hours. What makes you think *Jason D.* has to mean anything?"

I shrugged. *"Night Train* I can understand. But *Jason D.* has to mean something. Especially since it was found on a scrap of paper in Saul's car on the night of the murder."

Calendar's eyes bulged. "That's the first time I've heard of that—"

"Yes," I said. "In his own handwriting, too. Now why was that? Unless of course, he had scribbled it down on a scrap of paper sometime and it just dropped. After all, it was turning out to be his biggest hit."

"Why didn't the police ever mention that?"

"Didn't think it was important, I guess. Who knows? I'm their friend but they don't tell me everything, either."

Carl Calendar frowned, pursing his lips. It made him look more pious than ever. "Did you mention this to the boys back there?"

"Uh uh. They're too upset to

think straight as it is." I pushed off the bar stool, leaving a bill. Behind me, the first blast of Henry Beaver's trumpet filled *The Slipper Club* with Roger Bright's piano stealing in softly beneath it. Then Taps Terry's drums whispered a sibilant beat.

Calendar clutched my arm. "You catch this killer, Mr. Noon, and that ten thousand is yours for the asking."

"I'll do that, Mr. Calendar," I said. I left him with that, strolling out of *The Slipper Club,* wondering all the way why I had told him such a tall story about a scrap of paper.

Jason D. I don't know. But something about the peculiarity of that name for a hit jazz record was haunting me. It had to mean something.

III

THE NEXT MORNING as I came through the plate glass door that said *Ed Noon Private Investigations,* Melissa Mercer said, "You have a lot of company."

"Did we pay the rent? The phone? Or did I forget to—"

"Stop clowning." She was very serious all of a sudden. "Inside you'll find Mrs. Terry, Mrs. Bright and Mrs. Beaver. You dig?"

"I dig," I told her. "What's their mood?"

"War-like. Very war-like."

I tossed my porkpie on the clothing tree. "Did they indicate why?"

Melissa nodded. "Something about you asking too many questions. That give you a clue?"

I straightened my tie. "Come in say five minutes from now just in case they start scratching my eyes out."

Melissa was right. I'd no sooner entered my private office than three tigerish, outraged females rose from their chairs and surrounded me. I held up my hands to placate them, wondering exactly why a simple interview with their talented husbands should call for such a mass display of hostility.

The Mrs. Terry, Bright and Beaver were all attractive, well-dressed and a bit gaudy. They all had matching angry eyes too.

"Ladies, please," I pleaded. "One at a time—"

"Mr. Noon," the nearest wife bellowed at me. "I'm Regina Terry. Taps told us about your little interview last night. What do you mean upsetting him so? The boys have hardly slept as it is since the murder."

"Yeah," the woman at her side emphasized the point by poking a carmine fingernail at me. "You got my Henry all in a daze. He's begun to suspect that one of the combo is responsible for Saul's death. What did you say to them, anyway?"

I stared at them. "Mrs. Beaver —Mrs. Terry—and you must be Mrs. Bright," I said to the third

member of the grievance committee. "Why should your husbands object to any investigation of Smith's murder? I should think they'd be the first ones that would want to see the killer caught."

"That's not the thing," Mrs. Beaver said, a little helplessly. "It's just that when you came to them, you made them think. Especially those funny questions about not playing *Jason D.* anymore. You see—our husbands have been together for years—they loved Saul —but now they've actually begun to suspect each other. With Saul being killed like that—"

"That's right," Mrs. Bright said, for the first time. She was a smaller woman than the others, with sad eyes. "It's not right. We all got the same thing from them when they got home last night. So when we called each other like women do, we decided to come and see you and set you straight just in case you're barking down a blind alley."

I frowned at that, taking a seat behind my desk, where I could watch all three of them. "What do you mean by that?" I demanded.

"Mr. Noon," Mrs. Bright said with all the conviction in the world. "You'd be dead wrong if you thought anybody in the combo killed Swinging Saul Smith. He was their God. You just don't kill him, no matter what he does. Do you understand that? So we don't want you wasting your time while the real killer gets away."

"That's it," affirmed Regina Terry, shaking her head like a holy-roller. "The combo is clean. We want you should remember that and leave them alone."

I looked at Mrs. Beaver. She nodded just as hard.

"Fair enough, ladies," I said. "Thanks for telling me. I'll keep it in mind. But would you just answer one question for me?"

"What's that?" they asked, almost in chorus.

"What does the title *Jason D.* mean?"

They didn't know. They said that there was no one named Jason D. in Swinging Saul Smith's life and that they had never wondered about the oddity of the name. Smiling, I ushered them out past Melissa Mercer who they smiled at warmly and left far more quietly than they had obviously come.

Melissa was grinning when she closed the door. "What's so funny, Mel?"

"Folks around here are going to think you're organizing a Freedom March, Ed. Either that or you're doing some work for the NAACP."

"Could be—someday," I said. "Right now, I'm more concerned with *Jason D.*"

"Jason's biblical, Ed. So's Saul. Maybe Swinging Smith just liked the Bible. He was a minister, wasn't he?"

"He was. And I thought of that. But it has to be something else. Those boys cut that tune out of

their repertoire for a different reason than the one they gave me. I'm sure of it."

I headed for the door, scooping my porkpie off the peg.

"Where are you going now?" Melissa asked. "You just got here."

"Down to Sam Goody's. To play a record. Be back in an hour. If Mike Monks calls, tell him to meet me at *The Slipper Club* tonight at ten o'clock."

Melissa's eyes got worried-looking. "Ed, didn't I just hear you tell those women in there that you were going to stay away from their husbands."

"Mel, you eavesdropped!"

"You were all talking loud."

"Okay, I promised them. But since when does a detective have to promise a murderer that he's going to abide by Marquis Of Queensbury rules?"

I could see she was still thinking about that when I closed the office door.

IV

JASON D. was a hit record all right. It was blaring over the street loudspeaker even as I entered the store. I found a pile of the records on the bin marked JAZZ, unearthed one and found an empty recording booth to play it in. Goody's was crowded with beatniks, collegiate looking kids and girls in slacks and ponytails. I felt like a Neanderthal Man but they all ignored me and let me play in peace.

It was a zingy platter. Real cool. Swinging Saul's slide trombone was a muted sarcasm of smooth notes dripping social comment all over Terry's drums, Bright's piano and Beaver's trumpet. I got a mild surprise. It wasn't all instrumental like I remembered. A male voice stole in every now and then, against the background of brass and skins and piano, simply intoning the months of the year. *"August, September . . . October."*

I played it five times before I got the message. Then I understood a lot about the murder of Swinging Saul Smith. I could be wrong, but there was no need for a crystal ball or flying guesses. I left Goody's without buying a record and got a grin from a bright-faced man on duty by the sound booths. When I passed through the entrance, *Jason D.* had been replaced by *Goldfinger*. Shirley Bassey's plantive blues beat was pounding the asphalt from on high.

That afternoon, I spent hours in *The New York Times* newspaper file department, going over old stories and feature articles on Swinging Saul, the combo itself and the entire history of its origins and triumphs. The combo had been riding high when Smith had died. A tour of Russia was in the offing, an engagement at the Newport Jazz Festival and a Command Performance before the Queen of England.

Smith and his merry musical men had very nearly rivaled the Beatles for popular appeal. They'd been on the Ed Sullivan Show no less than fifteen times in the last five years. A lot of gravy train had creashed with one explosion of a .357 Magnum slug.

Carl Calendar had been a little-known songwriter when he had first heard the boys play in an obscure dump in Florida way back in '53 but he'd known good music when he heard it. From that day forward, Swinging Saul Smith became a national habit like the All-Star game.

I finished up around three, phoned the office and Melissa told me that Monks had gotten my message and would make *The Slipper Club*. There had been a mild lead since he talked to me last. A janitor who worked in the building across the street from Carl Schurz Park recalled seeing the Cadillac just before it piled onto the pavement. He hadn't heard a shot but he'd seen the running figure of a woman somewhere in the vicinity of the wreck.

That was something to think about. I thought about it as I hung up and looked for something to do until ten o'clock. It was too late to go back to the office. I didn't feel like it anyway.

There were two old Bogart movies playing on Forty Two Street. *The Maltese Falcon* and *Casablanca*. What the hell. As good a way to kill time as anything I could whip up on short notice.

They say if you have co-incidences you spoil a good story. Maybe so. Things don't work out so custom-made, they say. Again, maybe so. But I'll be damned if I didn't sit and watch Humphrey Bogart cry in his beer for the lost Ingrid Bergman and come up with one of the answers to the murder of Swinging Saul Smith. It was right there in front of me on the big darkened screen.

Maybe the piano playing *As Time Goes By* was reminiscent of *Jason D.*, I don't know. But when Bogey looked at Dooley Wilson and commanded huskily: *"Play it Sam."* I had the murderer and the motive. I'd known for three hours who the murderer was, as far back as Sam Goody's. But now I had the motive.

I got impatient waiting for ten o'clock, as good as the movies were.

V

"YOU FOUND A piece of paper in the murder car that had *Jason D.* scribbled on it," I told Monks by way of preamble when he joined me at the bar. The Slipper Club was going full blast, thanks to the presence of the combo on the stand. Terry, Bright and Henry Beaver were giving *Birth Of The Blues* all they had in them.

"More tricks, Mr. Noon?"

"Yes, and a good one. Just tread along with Ed."

He made a face but he nodded, nursing his pop soda. "Fair enough. I called you in on this. If you've got a lead, I'll play it down the line with you."

"What about your running woman near the murder car?"

"Can't say for sure. The park is sort of a lover's lane. Could have been anybody. May take a week to check."

"Take my advice, forget it. You've got bigger fish to fry right here tonight."

"Meaning?"

"Later," I warned him. "Here comes Calendar. I want him in on this for the showdown too."

"It's your party." Monks swung around on his stool. "Hello, Calendar. Nice crowd." I smiled at Carl Calendar as he joined us. His smooth round face with its bald crown still looked strangely angelic in such surroundings.

"Good evening, Captain Monks —Mr. Noon. Anything develop in the case?"

"That depends," Monks said quietly, giving me the lead. "Noon here has a few ideas."

"Yes, yes," Calendar said impatiently. "He claims you found a scrap of paper near Saul's body that had the words *Jason D.* on it."

"That?" Monks laughed. "Not much there. After all, who'd be more likely to have such an item on him than Swinging Saul? Be like finding a Christmas gift list on old St. Nick."

"Precisely." Calendar smiled but it was an unhappy smile. "Still, it got my hopes up. You know. I thought it might be some last-second effort to name the murderer—like you read in books."

"Hardly likely, Calendar," I said. "A man who has his head blown off has no time to write notes unless—"

"Yes, Noon?" Monks said almost sweetly.

"Skip it." I eyed Calendar. "We'd like to have a pow-wow with the combo when they come off. You too. Okay?"

"Certainly." Calendar eyed an expensive watch strapped to his pink wrist. "Another fifteen minutes. I'll meet you back there." He waved and moved off, disappearing among the packed tables.

"What was that all about, Ed?" Monks asked sarcastically.

"Just what I said. Show-down. The Slipper Club will make all the papers tomorrow. You too, dear Captain Monks. For it is here that you will capture the murderer of Swinging Saul Smith—" I broke off, turning away just in time to miss the roving gaze of Regina Terry from a ringside table near the combo. Mrs. Beaver and Mrs. Bright were with her too. All decked out in their furs, finery and glittering jewelry.

Monks growled, "Who are you hiding from?"

"A war party. Come on. Let's drift backstage," I said. "I know the way."

With Monks' broad back as cover, we made our way to the dressing room. The corridor was narrow, pipe-lined and dank, as gaudy as the interior of the club was. We found the door, pushed it open. Carl Calendar was already there, a patient expression on his face. He rose when we came in, indicating a pair of chairs for us to take.

Monks grunted and sat down, staring skeptically at the make-up boxes, cold cream tubes and cartons of Kleenex. His nostrils wrinkled disapprovingly.

"Glad you got here, first, Calendar," I said. "It will save a lot of wear and tear on my larynx. Tell him, Mike."

Monks scowled, coming alert in a hurry. He knew the weird turns of my mind.

"Tell me what, Captain?" Carl Calendar said softly, a pulse showing in his throat.

"Tell him," I said quickly, "that you know he is the murderer of Swinging Saul Smith and if he doesn't say yes before the boys get here, we'll have a helluva time keeping them from tearing him apart and tossing him to the mob out there."

Carl Calendar took a step backward, halting only when the table before the bulb-bordered mirror stopped him. His face was working overtime. "What's this—what are you trying to say—?"

"He's saying, Mr. Calendar," I continued, "that we know you are the real author of *Jason D.*, that you killed Smith and tonight he received a positive identification from an eyewitness who saw you leaving the scene of the crime."

Carl Caelndar looked at his watch, then at the door. Even from where we stood, we could hear the crashing finale of the music from out front. The combo's performance was ending and soon the door would open and three men would come in who loved Swinging Saul Smith like a father.

What would they do to his murderer? I gambled on Carl Calendar thinking just that. He was thinking about it. Sweat had appeared magically on his forehead.

"You're lying—" he whimpered, holding his hands up in protest. "It's a bluff to cover your own incompetence. I'm not being taken in."

Monks has eyes to see with. He pinned Carl Calendar with his stoniest look. "No, Calendar. She identified you perfectly. Now will you come along quietly before the combo gets here or shall we just wait for them and have a kangaroo court like in the old days?"

"Captain—this is preposterous!" But still his eyes were on the door. He was straining to hear the sound of approaching feet. Suddenly, a raucous laugh of jollity—it sound-

ed like Henry Beaver—came from the corridor.

"Okay," I snapped. "You can clear yourself in front of Taps, Roger and Henry. They knew about you writing *Jason D.,* didn't they? That's why they won't play it. Because it's not Saul's true stuff, no matter how much money it's made. But they'd never believe you had the guts enough to kill Saul. That's why they never suspected you."

"Noon—Monks—" Calendar looked close to fainting. "Get me out of here. I'll talk. Yes—I shot him—because he wasn't a saint. He took what was mine, and wouldn't give me the credit. I lost my head, grabbed the gun out of his glove compartment—"

The marching footsteps came closer. The door rattled. Carl Calendar fell forward in a dead faint. He had reached the end of his rope. I caught him before he hit the stone floor. Monks rushed to the door, holding back the sudden influx of a bewildered trio of musicians.

"What's going on here?" asked Henry Beaver. "What's happened to Carl?"

"Dizzy spell," I suggested, smiling thinly. "We were just catching a smoke in here. Come on, Mike. We'll get him outside for some fresh air. Be back in a few minutes, fellows. We have something to tell you that will make you a little happier."

Between the two of us, Monks and I carried Carl Calendar out to the side walk fronting the alleyway of The Slipper Club. A sky of twinkling stars looked down, in matching contrast to the man-made neon.

Monks' official car pulled up and Mike motioned the driver and plainclothesman out. They packed Carl Calendar in the rear, looking questioningly at Monks. He made a sour face. "Book him. Murder of Saul Smith. I'll ride down with you to take his confession. But first—" He elbowed me over to the alley wall and looked at me steadily for a moment.

"Okay, genius. We got a confession. Where's your proof?" In case he denies it all down at nice, safe Headquarters where there aren't any comboes to beat his brains out?"

I dug out a Camel. "I did some homework. He's a frustrated songwriter. He wrote *Jason D.* Smith took the credit—and the royalties which run into six figures. You check on Calendar's whereabouts after the concert. I bet you can put him at Schurz Park shooting a .357 Magnum at an ungrateful client whom all the world loved."

Monks sighed. "Can you prove he wrote this song? I grant you, it's motive enough, but I need facts."

"Okay. The man's name is *Calendar.* The song is called *Jason D.* No reason for it. None in the

world. Does its use suggest anything to you?"

"None whatsoever."

"You have to hear the number, I guess. It's all about July, August, September, October, November and December. You dig? It's practically an autograph. J-A-S-O-N and D. Now that title from a man named Calendar makes sense."

Monks cursed. "And that's all you had to go by, Ed?"

"No," I admitted. "Humphrey Bogart helped too."

"I'm crazy to ask I know but I'm asking—how?"

"The theme song of the Bogart movie *Casablanca* is a famous one. Even a duffer like you must have heard of *As Time Goes By.*"

"So I heard it," Monks barked impatiently. "So what does that have to do with Carl Calendar murdering his golden goose?"

I smiled at him in the way I knew always infuriated him.

"As time goes by, Captain Monks, a man can get awfully tired of just winning money and not the plaudits that are due him. *'The fundamental things apply . . .'* He who steals my purse steals trash. He who steals my good name——"

"God," he sighed exasperatedly. "Are you quoting again? Okay, okay. See you downtown in the morning. Ten sharp. Meantime you back into the Slipper and calm those characters down before they come out here wondering what's what with their dandy little manager."

I watched the squad car roar away from the curb. Monks waved. I stamped out my cigarette and went back into the club to tell the boys just who had killed Swinging Saul Smith. It wasn't going to be easy.

Maybe they'd known it all the time but like little children, hadn't dared believe they could live that close to the Devil and not know it.

When I got back to the dressing room, Taps Terry, Roger Bright and Henry Beaver looked at me in a mutual silence ringed with the awful truth. There was a solemn hush in the place. I put my back to the door and lit another cigarette.

"Well," Henry Beaver said slowly, his glasses gleaming. "I imagine we'll be having to get a new manager real soon."

"Something like that," I said. "Are you surprised?"

They all shook their heads slowly. Henry Beaver spread his hands. There was a suspicious moistness about his eyes.

"There are some things," he murmured, "that a man just doesn't want to believe."

There was nothing I could say to that. So I didn't.

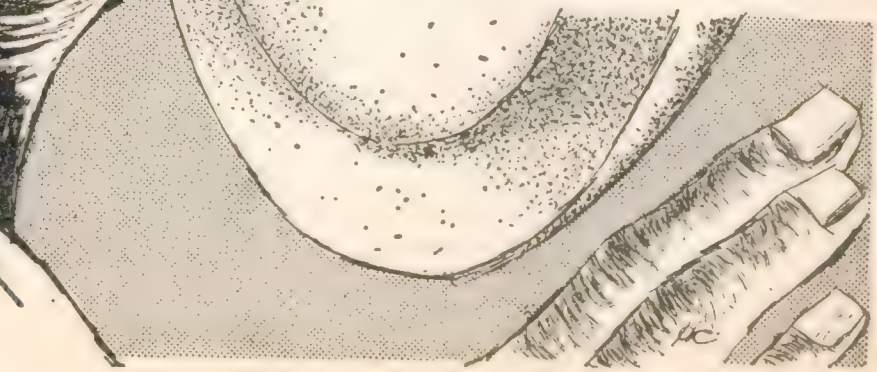
Safe-cracking can be . . . a most exacting profession.

the Hartford story

by

HARRY D. ESHLEMAN

FROM TIME TO time the deeds of Harry Freeman, The Safe Man, have been dramatized in the local papers. The feature article, a form of mutual exploitation, is, in the case of my uncle, usually the work of some newspaperman new to the



area who discovers that the profession of a legitimate 'safecracker' is both rare and unusual—which indeed it is.

There is one photograph which appeared in a thirty year old issue of the *Sunday Supplement* which is particularly memorable. It shows Uncle Harry intently poised in front of a huge vault door, straining to hear the tumblers click on the locks inside. Framing his photograph is a huge, superimposed safe dial, ringing him with numbers one to a hundred.

It is a good shot, and the events which led to that particular feature article are remarkable indeed, although the full story must wait until a later time. Moreover, that tale has overtones of politics, and the subject of politics presents too much opportunity for digression—and there are enough unsettled aspects of the Hartford story to satisfy anyone's taste for digression.

But I'm doing the very thing I wish to avoid.

Let me try again to put this in focus. The things which happened during the time in question—the time when a regular feature article, not the earlier political one, came out—were things based on events of the indefinite past. A past which only my Uncle Harry could spot to the day if he were so inclined. And though I heard them related again on only two occasions, the details of the Hartford story never saw newsprint, despite the fact that it was the diligence of an inquiring reporter which first brought them to my attention.

Unlike most of Uncle Harry's stories, this one is not the product of many re-shapings. Many of his 'safecracker' stories are still undergoing minor revisions and evolutions in their retelling. I have heard some of his tales dozens of times since their introduction.

Of course, I was a captive audience: I would be the one working on the safe while Uncle Harry amused the customer with accounts of his previous exploits. Oddly enough, his clients never contrasted their own, immediate safe problems, usually routine and minor, with the complex, suspenseful things that had happened to other people's safes.

My uncle is an enthusiastic story teller, and his ego allows him to depict himself as the hero of his tales without stinting. His customers have been so enthralled by his art that his stories become part of his service to their own safes. My uncle's fees for repairing safes, sometimes exorbitantly high in relation to the actual work and time put in, were easier to collect after such unexpected entertainment had been included.

Uncle Harry never denied that the business of safe repair was partly illusion. He left himself leaway for artistry that could be either practical or imaginative.

But to return to the newspaper

man. He came one weekday evening to get some material for a feature article he had been contemplating for his newspaper. He had heard about Harry Freeman, The Safe Man, and wanted to interview this man who had such a fascinating trade. Mother and Dad and I had walked over to visit Uncle Harry and Aunt Clara that evening, and the five of us were sitting on the porch eating ice cream when the reporter came. The reporter refused Aunt Clara's offer of a dish of ice cream. Rather a stroke of good luck, I thought with my teen-age cynicism of that time, for I was sure we had already divided that quart before he came.

Instead, the reporter got out a batch of long yellow papers and started to jot down notes with one of the numerous pencils which had crammed his coat pocket. He looked every bit the way a reporter should and I felt sure he would don one of those small green visors that newsmen wear as soon as they get back to their typewriters.

"You mean, Mr. Freeman, that you can actually hear the tumblers of a lock clicking into place, when you're trying to open a safe?"

"Yes," said Uncle Harry, "though of course on some safes it's practically impossible to hear *all* the tumblers drop—especially on a side gear lock."

Uncle Henry enjoyed throwing people off his trail by introducing such a technical term as side gear lock. In this case the reporter, mystified, asked what a side gear lock was and got a long-winded, overly mechanical exposition. I noticed he had stopped writing notes a few lines down under the heading: SIDE GEAR LOCK.

The next time Uncle Harry brought up some such exotic term —I believe it was tapered spindle —the reporter merely jotted its initials, and let it go at that.

The reporter worked his way through questions about how Harry Freeman got his start, how long he had been opening and repairing safes, and whether or not he ever got one that he couldn't open. My uncle's answers involved long, detailed explanations (and unabashed self praise) about how he had developed the fire-proof safe, had tested numerous samples for the Underwriters Laboratories, and had played a key role in the nation's developing safe industry.

The reporter was impressed. Uncle Harry had a way of making his self aggrandizement palatable, even somewhat exciting. The mechanics of safe construction, the particular shapes and bends of safe doors that keep heat out during fires, the gradual processes of trial and error leading to burglar-resistant locking devices—all these have been worked at and perfected by numerous men around the country who were in positions similar to my uncle's.

It was his ability to describe and

praise his own contributions to this industry-wide progress that makes Harry Freeman good news copy. Who am I to sort out truths from the scramble of events which transpired so long before my time?

When he was ready, Uncle Harry finally got off his generalizations about the safe industry and got down to specific adventures. It was then that I first heard the Hartford story referred to as one of my uncle's most interesting experiences. It was that nameless reporter who first requested the story in those very terms.

"And tell me, Mr. Freeman," he was saying, "just what would you consider to be one of your most interesting experiences as a professional safecracker?"

The summer evening on the porch, the ice cream, the hour or so of talk about nothing but himself and his business (surrounded by relatives who for once must keep silent because of the seriousness of a professional newspaper interview) had set the scene for a Harry Freeman episode.

"Well, you know it's a little hard to pick out the most interesting job I've ever had—there have been quite a few," he said. "But I suppose, for the purposes of your article, the job I had up in Hartford one winter quite a few years ago might be of interest. The Company had sent me up on a bank vault installation job and I had been living in Hartford for about six weeks and had made a few friends at the bank up there. Tommy Long of the Edna Casualty for one.

"But my closest pal up there was old Jim Fegley—Jim Fegley used to be first vice president at the Hartford Trade and Trust. We palled around—drank some beer and played some poker—many an evening when I was up there.

"But the odd thing about old Jim Fegley that winter was that he died. He was walking along a stream on his way to work one morning and he slipped on the ice and tumbled down a bank over some rocks and broke his neck. They didn't find him until that afternoon. As you might infer from his important position, Jim Fegley had quite a bit of money. He lived in a great big house up on a hill, near where that writer, Clemens, used to live—I remember meeting one of the Clemens girls one time when I was over at Jim's place.

"Anyway, Jim Fegley died and his will was read. He left his house and most of his money to his wife and two sons, to be divided equally between the three of them. But in that will he also stipulated that he had put aside certain sums of money for his four servants. Years ago most of those Hartford bankers kept at least four servants.

"It was particularly remarkable that Jim Fegley's will stated with great precision the terms for re-

warding them. Let me try to remember the exact wording because it was important. It went like this: 'And to my four faithful, trusted employees, I do bequeath the certain sums of money to be found in appropriately marked envelopes in the safe in my study, the amounts and attainments of which are commensurate with their years of service to our family.'

"As you might guess, the reason I knew about such intimate family details was because of the safe involved. They called me in because they couldn't get that safe opened. Old Jim had apparently lacked the presence of mind to include the safe combination along with the will he left with his lawyer.

"So they called me in to knock open the safe and to find out what Jim had willed his servants. I went up to Jim's study. It was the same room where old Jim and I had polished off more than a few pints of whiskey, only it was all cleaned up and kind of calm now. It was then that the lawyer told me about the will. He read me that part I've already quoted to you: 'I do bequeath the certain sums of money to be found in appropriately marked envelopes in the safe in my study, the amounts and attainments of which are commensurate with their years of service to our family'.

"I hated to knock the safe open. It was really a beautiful little safe, one of our Company's, as a matter of fact. I knew there was a burglar-proof trigger in it which would make breaking it open extra difficult. So I asked them if they could spare me an hour to play around with the combination lock.

"I tried all the standard numbers. I even tried some un-standard numbers that are favorites of my own. I tried out Jim Fegley's birthday and his wife's birthday and their anniversary, too. Sometimes a businessman will use a

number like that on his private safe at home. But unfortunately none of those numbers worked.

"Then I got to thinking about that will and those four servants. What seemed especially puzzling to me was the wording of that one part of the will, the thing about 'the amounts and attainments of which are commensurate with their years of service'. Why both of them, I wondered. Why 'amounts' and 'attainments'? I asked the lawyer if this was some sort of legal phrase necessary to validate the will beyond question. When he told me he had never come across that phrase before I asked him what he thought it might mean.

" 'Well,' he said, 'if the *amounts* are commensurate with years of service, that would mean that each servant will receive the appropriate sum for the years he or she worked here.'

" 'But what about the *attainments?*' I asked.

" 'That really doesn't make much sense, Mr. Freeman," he told me.

"I fiddled around with some other numbers and thought to myself about that word 'attainments'. Then the meaning of that word struck me.

" 'How does his sound to your legal mind?' I asked the lawyer. 'I think the servants would be able to *attain* the money because of their years of service.'

"He still didn't see what I was trying to say.

" '*Attain* means *to reach,* doesn't it? I mean that in order to attain the money, they would have to open the safe. The *amount* of money for each servant is inside the safe, and that will be determined by each one's years of service. But to *attain* the money, to get the safe open and reach in for it so to speak, the servants' years of service will also figure into the problem.'

" 'I see," said the lawyer, finally comprehending me. 'You mean that the safe combination has something to do with the specific number of years that each servant has been working.' He then made a rough guess as to their years of service.

" 'Right, right,' I said, quite pleased with my little feat of reasoning. 'Now ask Mrs. Fegley to jot down exactly how many years each of her servants has been here.'

"The lawyer went out and I sat down alone, not wishing to touch the safe while no one was around. Opening a safe without witnesses is always bad policy. But more than mere policy, the notion that I had really solved the puzzle of Jim Fegley's will rather fascinated me. For some reason I wanted to test my theory with an audience on hand.

"Mrs. Fegley came in with the information I wanted. I explained to her my line of reasoning, emphasizing the curious wording in the will. The years that each servant had been with the Fegley household were four, seven, eighteen and twenty-six. I tried those numbers in sequence and, quick as a wink, the safe clicked open.

"The lawyer took out four sealed envelopes, each neatly marked in Jim Fegley's careful banker's script with the name of a servant. When I saw the lawyer later on that week, he informed me that the contents of each envelope had contained, just as the will stipulated, 'amounts' that were 'commensurate with years of service', that is, four hundred dollars, seven hundred dollars, eighteen hundred

dollars and twenty-six hundred dollars, which were pretty good sums in those days. My own fee for opening that safe, incidentally, was fifty dollars, which they paid gladly, probably because of the clever deduction I had made."

Having listened to and jotted down Uncle Harry's story with solemnity, the reporter then looked up with obvious pleasure. Indeed, all of us on the porch had enjoyed the story that evening. The incidents Uncle Harry had related, none of which the family had heard before, were doubly entertaining because of their freshness.

"What a wonderful story, Harry," Aunt Clara told him. This was high praise from his wife. "How come you never told that one before?"

At that question an unusual look came over Uncle Harry's face. It was the look of muddlement one tries to feign when caught driving the wrong way on a one way street, the not-quite-convincing look of innocence. My uncle's look was then, strangely, a look of some sort of guilt. I had a momentary feeling that perhaps he made the whole Hartford story up: he was certainly capable of doing that if he chose.

But at their wildest, his stories were never more than mere embellishments on events which had actually happened. Harry Freeman was not a man to lie. Nevertheless, a momentary look of guilt had crossed his face, and all of us on the porch noticed it.

Aunt Clara caught that look and it startled her. "Harry, dear, what a funny expression you have. Weren't you supposed to tell that story?" Aunt Clara had sensed her husband's fear, which may be one of the things wives are for, since men can seldom express such emotion openly.

"That's exactly it, Clara," Uncle Harry answered, his voice losing confidence and ebulition. "And that's why," he said quietly to the reporter, "I'll have to ask you not to print that story."

At this point the reporter, unable to follow the emotional biplay —which had occurred—reporters can be the most insensitive of mortals—asked, "What do you mean by 'that's exactly it', Mr. Freeman? Exactly what? And I don't see why a story like that couldn't be told. It's a wonderful tale for a write-up. It's almost like a Sherlock Holmes mystery. Couldn't I say I was using fictitious names and write it up that way?"

Uncle Harry shook his head. "Don't any of you see why that story should never be told?"

None of us answered. Nobody could think of a good reason why it shouldn't, but my mother answered finally by venturing to say that perhaps the contents of a will were not supposed to be made public. But my dad answered her that the reverse was often true, es-

pecially if someone thought he had been left something and he wished to verify that the will in question stated otherwise.

Uncle Harry smiled to himself. It was obvious he enjoyed leaving all of us hanging on his next words, waiting for the full explanation of the mysterious angle to his tale.

He lit a cigarette—his first since finishing the ice cream—and then, finally, said: "But don't any of you see what was wrong? It was the combination. It worked. It actually opened that safe. The number of years of service, just as the will stipulated, really and truly were the numbers that Jim Fegley used in his safe combination."

"I'm not sure I understand you, Mr. Freeman," the reporter interrupted. "Do you mean that ordinarily a banker couldn't change a combination himself? That he would get a safe expert to change it for him?"

"Not at all," replied my uncle, "a banker is one of the few men who actually can change a safe combination by himself. He is often required to be the only person who knows certain combinations. Not even a safe man is trusted with all bank combinations. No, Jim Fegley could change his own safe combination easily; there's a much more serious flaw to the things that transpired than that."

What was that serious flaw, we wondered. We were still there on the porch, waiting to be told. Uncle Harry liked the situation, obviously. But then, so did we.

"It's just this," he said at last, "those safe numbers were all set on the actual years each servant had been there. The amounts in the envelopes inside were likewise predetermined by their years of service, one hundred dollars for each year, as I mentioned before. Don't you see the strange thing about that set-up?"

We waited for him to continue. "Let me ask you this one question," he said. "How do you think Jim Fegley knew he would die that year?"

The strange, sad truth gradually struck each of us. It was a serious matter. The wording of Jim Fegley's will be pointed to one ugly thing: suicide!

"Suicide. That's what it points to." Uncle Harry spoke the word himself. "It dawned on me there was something peculiar about Jim Fegley's will the moment that safe clicked open up there in Hartford more than thirty years ago. It was clear to me that Jim had intended that safe to be opened in just the way it was, in just the year it was. No other year, mind you, for in that case the safe combination, the years of service, and the amounts of money wouldn't apply." It was evident Uncle Harry intended to say more, and we waited in silence for him to say it.

"Yes, everything pointed to suicide. I realized it then with a sick-

ening feeling, but I vowed to myself never to breathe a word about my opinion. Why? For the sake of Jim's memory—for the sake of Jim's family. It would do no good for them to suspect suicide. And remember, there was actually no real proof."

At that point Uncle Harry's voice faltered. He lowered his head, saying, "But I got carried away with my story this evening and I broke my vow to myself—and to the memory of old Jim."

"But what a terrible way to kill yourself," mused the reporter, "to throw yourself down a rocky cliff in mid-winter! Even at that, it might only be a hit or miss affair."

"You wouldn't say that if you saw the place where Jim fell off," said Uncle Harry. "But I think you can understand that in order to make his death look accidental, it was the only way Jim could pull it off. A gun, or gas, or any other way would have served the same end as far as he was concerned; but Jim Fegley was the kind of man who always thought first of his family, even under such circumstances."

It was then that the reporter, hesitating, said, "Well, Mr. Freeman, I guess we'll have to leave that one out of the paper."

"I guess you'll have to. It's a good story, I'll admit, but the Fegley boys are both grown men by now. Probably have children of their own by now, too. You wouldn't want to destroy a father's fond recollections about his own children's grandfather, would you?"

"No, I guess not," agreed the reporter.

As a substitute, Uncle Harry quickly began another story for the reporter. It was about a nickel which jammed the vault in the County Treasurer's office and kept it from locking. That was the one which eventually appeared in the paper, and there's no point in repeating it here.

As I mentioned at the beginning, Uncle Harry did tell the Hartford story on two other occasions. It was used both times to edify customers while I was doing the routine maintenance on the safes. The story was told in much the same way those next two times, except that the place where Jim Fegley slipped in the snow had increased to obviously dangerous heights in the retellings.

We were driving home from our safe repair job after the second retelling of the Hartford story when I asked my uncle about one detail that had disturbed me each of the three times I had heard him review the events.

"You said that as a banker Jim Fegley could easily change a safe combination. If so, wouldn't it have been easy for him to have changed his safe combination each year and at the same time add another one hundred dollars to each of those four envelopes at Christ-

mas time when he was in the holiday spirit?"

I was driving and couldn't observe Uncle Harry's face closely for any visible reactions. But he did answer me.

"Boy, that's quite possible. You stick with me in this business and you'll learn soon enough that anything is quite possible in this business."

I was of high school age at the time, and his evasive answer left me angry and disappointed with the old man. But I felt a little sorry for him, too. Especially when I realize that Uncle Harry never told the Hartford story again.

An Exciting Complete Novelet—in the Next Issue

THE CASE OF THE GORGEOUS GAMS

A Hard-Hitting Crime Novelet

By JOHN D. MacDONALD

Big city crime and corruption are often tied in with newsroom problems that can keep a reporter awake nights. And when there's a mysterious-derelict, murder angle—A suspense thriller by a mystery story great.

Stone Cold Dead

in the Market Place

Pamela's husband appeared to be one of those peculiar, stubborn men who have an ingrained prejudice against turning up dead. And that, to Pamela, seemed unfair . . . even outrageous.

by CLAYTON MATTHEWS

PAMELA CARTWRIGHT started to wish for her husband to die when it began to look as though he never would. Yet the thought of killing Gus never really entered her mind until after she met Roger.

Roger, who tended bar at the Idleway Cocktail Lounge a block up the street from Gus' Meat Market, was slim and dark and attractive—all the things Gus was not. And he was somewhat less than half Gus' sixty-five years. There was another large difference between the two men: Gus had a hundred thousand or so stored away somewhere with a pack rat's cunning, while Roger candidly admitted to Pamela, after he came to know her well enough, that he had to play a clever tune on the cash register to stretch his money from one payday to the next.

Pamela grew bored lounging around the apartment over the market and often slipped out for a

quick drink or two in the afternoon when Gus was the busiest. After Roger came to work at the Idleway, Pamela made the place a daily habit.

The third time she dropped in she found herself alone for nearly a half hour with Roger. He came down the bar, brought her a drink and lingered to chat.

Pamela was tiny, golden and generously stacked in certain critical areas, with guileless blue eyes and a soft round red mouth that always looked as though it had been thoroughly kissed only moments before.

They made a striking contrast in light and dark, Pamela thought. Roger, dark, lean and handsome; herself, blonde, small, and properly curved. This self-assessment was not all vanity. She had long ago arrived at the sum total of her assets. She had used them to trap Husband Number One.

Pamela had made one small mistake: Husband Number One had wildly misrepresented his financial status. He hadn't an extra dollar bill to use to light the big black cigars to which he was addicted. The marriage hadn't lasted any longer than it took Pamela to discover her original error.

This time she hadn't made *that* mistake. Gus had the money, but he kept his big butcher's fist clamped tight around it. All she got was the little he allowed to leak through his clenched fingers.

Roger said, "I just learned today who you are—Pamela Cartwright."

"All I know is I've heard people call you Roger."

"Roger Dorn. And you're married to the butcher up the street. That's what really floored me. Why, for God's sake?"

"Well—I know he doesn't look it, but Gus is worth a lot of money," she said in her defense. "He had just sold a chain of supermarkets when I married him a year ago."

He nodded slowly: no further explanation was needed. A perfect rapport had been established. "So why the penny-ante operation?"

"He couldn't stand being retired. Gus has worked hard since he was a kid. He bought the meat market to have something to do."

"And now it looks like he'll live forever?"

Pamela was glum. "God, yes!"

His gaze rested on her in speculation. "Gus have many relatives?"

"One. An old-maid cousin." Pamela didn't think it necessary to add that the cousin, Henrietta Townes, hated her with a crusading fervor. Henrietta had been Gus' only heir until he married Pamela.

Roger raised his glass. "Here's to a long life for some, a short one for others."

Pamela drank to that.

Roger was off on Tuesdays. Within two weeks they had found

a small discreet hotel miles away from Hollywood and the market. And Pamela's boredom was lightened. There was no real danger. Gus was far too busy in the market afternoons to concern himself with her whereabouts until closing time. So long as she got back in time for dinner Pamela was safe.

But those Tuesday afternoons of stolen ecstasy only deepened her dilemma. Roger offered her something she very much wanted to keep. Yet there was Gus' money. She had worked too hard to sacrifice that.

And neither Roger nor Pamela ever remotely considered giving up Gus' money for what they had together in the hotel room. For what was one without the other?

"No, Pam baby, there has to be a way." Thus Roger first put it into words for them. He sat scooted up in bed, the sheet drawn up around his waist. "All we have to do is work it out."

"Do you think I haven't tried?" she cried. "It would be so easy if he'd ever get sick. He has this perfect horror of doctors. He's always boasting how he's never been to a doctor in his life and never intends to. But he never gets sick! He hasn't even had a cold since I've known him!"

"Then we have to kill him." Roger was matter-of-fact.

Pamela wasn't in the least shocked. It had occurred to her since meeting Roger, and she had walked around it, looking at it from every angle. But the danger had been too great. Maybe with two working on it the danger would be less?

She went right to the heart of it. "How?"

"It always seemed to me that a plain and simple accident would be the best way to kill a man." Roger clicked a thumbnail against his teeth in thought. "Does Butcher Gus drive a car?"

"Oh, yes. He's got a junk heap ten years old. Every Sunday we have to take a drive down to some beach to watch the sunset."

"There you are. One Sunday Gus sees his last sunset. He goes over a cliff nose first into the ocean." He spread his hands. "And an old car is even better. Many things can happen to it. The brakes can go, for one."

Pamela wanted to pursue this line of thought, but her glance happened to fall on her wrist watch. She leaped out of bed with a small cry. "God, darling, I have to run! If I'm not there in time for dinner, Gus will be furious."

It wasn't that she had to cook dinner for Gus. She couldn't boil water, as the saying went, and Gus said it often. He was proud she couldn't cook. All he asked of her was that she be there while he ate so he could look at her.

Anyway, it wasn't necessary she knew how to cook. Gus was an excellent cook. True, he was a

meat and potato man, but what more did a man need?

Pamela made it home in time. She was in the apartment with time enough to slip into a pair of tight stretch pants and a tighter sweater before she heard Gus on the stairs.

Gus was a big man with unruly gray hair, a beaming moon face, hands like dangling hams and a belly that hung over his belt like a loose sack of grain.

Pamela received her usual greeting. "Sweetheart! What have you been doing with yourself all afternoon?"

"Oh, I went to an afternoon movie," she murmured.

"That must have been fun." He beamed at her and started for the kitchen to prepare dinner.

Pamela had long since learned that Gus rarely listened to anything she said. She was positive that if she told him she had spent the afternoon in a hotel room two-timing him with a stranger, Gus would say, "That must have been fun, sweetheart."

With a sigh she followed him into the kitchen.

Gus had a Gargantuan appetite. During their first exploratory dialogues into ways and means, Pamela had mentioned poisoning. It would be so simple, the way Gus ate. Roger vetoed that immediately; it was too risky. No matter how clever a poison they used, there was always the chance it would be discovered if an autopsy was done. No, a simple accident was the best way.

One Tuesday afternoon, after several weeks' discussion, they set the date. Gus had already told Pamela where he intended to drive the following Sunday afternoon.

They sacrificed that particular Tuesday afternoon for a reconnaissance of the proposed scene of the crime. The area was a deserted side road off the highway in the vicinity of Palos Verdes. Gus liked to park in a deserted section and stroll along the beach for a mile or so. His weekly exercise, he always commented to Pamela, beaming.

According to the plan, Roger would take the day off and follow, discreetly, in his car. While Gus and Pamela walked along the beach, he would work on the brake line. Not cut it, of course, since a knife cut could be detected in case of an investigation. But with a car as old as Gus' that wouldn't be necessary.

The dirt road leading back to the highway corkscrewed perilously close to the cliff edge, the ocean a hundred feet below. A half mile from where Gus would park was a steep downgrade and a sharp curve. Gus would have to use his brakes to negotiate the curve.

There was a certain amount of danger to Pamela since she had to stay with the car until it was clear it was going over the cliff. But she

would have enough prior warning to keep her hand on the door handle, press it down at the last second and roll out of the car. So long as she got out in time, all she would suffer would be torn clothing, bruises and scratches, all of which would make the whole thing more convincing.

Pamela had the feel of Gus' money in her very grasp, escape from the meat market, a rollicking future with Roger—on the whole a prospect attractive enough to dim the danger. She approved the plan wholeheartedly.

The plan went swimmingly. Which was apt, Roger said later with a chuckle, since Gus couldn't swim a stroke.

As the car started down the steep incline, Gus stepped on the brakes. They held momentarily, then the pedal went all the way to the floorboards. Gus pumped furiously, but the pedal slammed against the floorboards each time. He pawed for the emergency brake. The old car stuttered briefly, then seemed to pick up speed.

As they went into the curve, Pamela pushed open the door and rolled free of the car. Her last glimpse of Gus showed him fighting the wheel with all his strength.

She kept her body relaxed, as Roger had cautioned her to do. She hit the ground and rolled over and over. During one apogee of her tumbling, she saw the car leave the edge of the cliff, soar like

a clumsy bird, and then plunge out of sight.

The fall knocked the breath from her, tore her clothes and broke the skin in several places. She lay still for a moment after she stopped rolling, fighting back dizziness. Finally she got to her feet and started toward the cliff. A sharp pain lanced through her ankle. She must have sprained it.

She hobbled to the lip of the bluff and peered over. The car had sunk out of sight. There was a narrow strip of sand at the bottom of the cliff, but the car's momentum had carried it far out into the water, as Roger had figured it would.

Still following the plan, Pamela limped up to the highway. Several cars passed her by, then two stopped together. She gasped out her version of what had happened. One car left to find the nearest telephone. The second car, a red

sports car, had only one occupant —a youth with a crew-cut.

He drove her back to the cliff edge. Stripping down to the swim trunks he wore under his clothes, he dived into the water again and again. After the fifth dive he glanced up at her, spreading his hands in a gesture of defeat.

For the first time Pamela allowed herself to feel a surge of elation. They had carried it off! She heard a siren wail up on the highway. She faced around to await the police car.

It was long after dark when the divers finally found the car. There was no sign of Gus. Evidently he had managed to force the door open and get out. Not being able to swim, he had been washed out to sea. It might be days, maybe never, before his body was recovered.

Pamela rode back to town in the red sports car with the crew-cut youth who had hovered at her side all afternoon, inarticulate and clumsy in his efforts to comfort her. He let her out in front of the darkened meat market.

It was a commercial district, pretty well deserted at night. There were no neighbors to see her. She waited in the shadows until the youth drove away, then limped to the telephone booth at the corner. She could have called from upstairs, but she couldn't wait that long.

Roger would be back in town and home by now. They had agreed it would be better not to see each other for a time. He answered on the first ring.

"Darling! It's all over! Gus is dead!"

"Tell me about it, Pam baby."

Quickly she told him. It was then he made his little jest.

"Oh, yes, darling, swimmingly!" She choked back a giggle. She was afraid if she started to laugh she would never stop.

She hung up, went inside the meat market and up the stairs to the apartment. She opened the door and closed it behind her before feeling along the wall for the light switch.

Pamela felt her heart come to a full stop. Gus was rising from the couch like an apparition. But it was no ghost. It was Gus—real, living, in the flesh.

He took a step toward her, beaming, and she shrank back.

"Sweetheart! I was getting worried about you."

"Gus! My God, it can't be! You're—"

"Dead? I almost was, for a minute there. But that car of mine was too old to stand the strain. The door on my side sprang open and I fell out—imagine that!—before it hit. But I guess the shock of it was a little too much. I wandered up the beach a mile or so in a daze. When I got back, there were all those people around. So I came home."

Abruptly her own shock was burned away by an overpowering rage. "And all this time I've been down there watching them dive for your body!"

He beamed at her. "That must have been fun, sweetheart."

She glared, speechless. Then she ran past him into the bedroom, locked the door and fell across the bed. The pain in her ankle burned to match her fury.

Roger scowled darkly when he saw her come into the bar the next afternoon. She took a stool by herself down at the far end.

After a moment he came down to her. He whispered tersely, "I thought we agreed not to—"

"Roger, he's alive!" she flung out, cutting him short. "Don't you understand me? Gus isn't dead!"

Roger grunted explosively. "Alive!"

"Yes!"

"But how?"

"What does it matter *how?* He's still alive!"

"Does he suspect?"

Pamela grew still. Strangely it hadn't occurred to her to wonder if Gus suspected anything. She said, "I don't think so. At least, he didn't act like it. Roger, what do we do now?"

Roger's face smoothed out. He smiled. "We try again, baby. What else?"

"But how? Gus said he wouldn't buy another car. He says he's getting too old to be driving."

"Then we have to work out another way." He clicked his thumb against his teeth. "Thing is, it increases the odds against us. One simple accident, okay. All in our favor. A second accident cuts the odds to maybe fifty-fifty. Still—" His eyes focused on her. "I think it's worth the risk. Don't you?"

Pamela agreed that it was indeed worth the risk.

In Roger's opinion the best place for the second accident was in the apartment. He quoted the well-publicized statistic as proof that most accidents happen in the home.

That Tuesday afternoon they worked out another way. Roger queried her exhaustively about the apartment over the market. Finally he had it. The thing was, it would be up to Pamela to execute it.

"Execute! That's pretty apt," Roger said with his grin, "considering what we plan to do."

Gus took a shower every night before going to bed. There was no wall heater in the bathroom, so Gus took a portable electric heater into the bathroom every time he took a shower. There was no gas heat either in the apartment or the market. Gus claimed gas heat wasn't good for the meat. He always turned the water on full force. The drain was partly plugged; by the time he was finished showering he always stood ankle-deep in water.

That night Pamela dawdled in the bathroom until she heard the TV click off. She waited until she heard the shower begin to roar before she opened the bathroom door and went in. She hesitated a moment. The heater, inches away from the shower stall, glowed like a red, malevolent eye.

She had rehearsed all the moves in private that afternoon. It was simple really, just as Roger had said it would be.

She took a deep breath and put the new plan in motion. She pretended to stumble, catching at the sliding shower door for support. It flew back. At the same time she hit the heater a glancing blow with the side of her foot, sending it tumbling into the shower stall.

She was so far off-balance she actually did fall, hooking her toe on something as she went down. She felt a wrench in the ankle that hadn't yet fully healed. She fell flat on her face. She remained still, listening for Gus to scream.

Instead she heard the water shut off. She twisted around to look behind her. The first thing that caught her glance was the heater cord jerked out of the wall socket. She had tripped over it!

Fearfully she looked up.

Gus, dripping water, a big towel draped around his waist, stood beaming down at her. "Having fun, sweetheart?"

Dear God, he was indestructible!

She choked out, "I'm sorry, Gus. I didn't—"

"Sorry for what? Sorry you didn't kill me? You think I don't know what's going on? You think I don't know you've tried to kill me twice now?"

She gaped at him.

"You think I don't know about your barkeep boy friend? The other day with the car I suspected. Now I know. I'll have to say neither one of you is very good at this. Twice you've bungled it." His grin was huge. "But if you keep trying you'll eventually succeed. So I've seen to it that you don't try again. I've written a letter. If anything—anything at *all!*—happens to me, the police will find the letter. In it, I tell them all about you and Roger Dorn. I should have told you this before, sweetheart, but I wanted to be absolutely certain. I took a big chance. I could be dead right now."

He loomed over her, beaming. "I'm not too upset about your bar playmate. I'm satisfied so long as you're around where I can look at you whenever I want. But I couldn't do that dead, could I sweetheart?"

It was the longest speech Pamela had ever heard him make. She lay without moving as he turned and strode out of the bathroom.

The next afternoon Pamela limped into the Idleway and down to her usual place at the end of the bar. Roger served her a drink. She

drank half of it at a gulp before she told him. He listened without interruption, his features still and thoughtful.

"Do you think he's lying?"

"About the letter? I don't know. But can we take that chance?"

"I suppose not. Do you have any idea where he might have hid it?"

"Any one of a hundred places," she said in despair. "He's got money and bank books hidden everywhere in the shop and the apartment. He doesn't trust banks, so he spreads his money around. But how could we search? He's always there. Always!"

Absently Roger flicked at his teeth with the thumbnail. Then he shrugged and grinned. "Well, that seems to tear it, Pam baby. He's got us right where it hurts. And I think we'd better break up our little duo. I don't mind playing house with a man's wife, so long as he doesn't know. But with him knowing— Well, it's kind of creepy. If you know what I mean?"

Pamela knew. She had the same feeling. "Then it's all over?"

"It's all over, baby. We leave it alone from here on in."

But they couldn't leave it alone. Gus saw to that.

The next evening Gus slipped on a bar of soap in the shower.

In the bedroom Pamela heard his muffled shout and the thump as he fell. By the time she got to him he was dead, his neck twisted

at a grotesque angle. Choking back her laughter, she turned off the water. She remembered his remark about how inept had been their efforts to kill him. Now it didn't matter; Gus had done the job for them.

Then she remembered something else.

In a panic she ran to the phone and dialed Roger's apartment.

"Roger, Gus is dead! He fell in the shower and killed himself!"

Roger began to laugh. "Like I said, most accidents happen in the home."

"You don't understand, Roger!

The letter! If the police find it, they'll think we killed him!"

His laughter died. "Oh, yes, the letter. I forgot. Look, baby, we have to find it. I'll be right there."

He was there within fifteen minutes. In that time Pamela had sailed through the apartment like a whirlwind in her frantic search for the letter.

Roger surveyed the shambles she had made with arched eyebrows. "We won't find it that fast. We need a little time."

"But we don't have any time! Not with Gus dead in there!"

"Don't you think I know that?"

"Then how?"

"I thought of something on the way over."

He strode into the bathroom. He picked Gus up, staggering under the weight, and started out with him.

IT TOOK FOUR days of painstaking search before they found the letter.

Meanwhile, the meat market was closed, a neatly lettered sign on the front door: *Closed Because of Illness*. To all who inquired, Pamela said that Gus was very ill with the flu. He was in bed, with Pamela in constant attendance, feeding him soup and seeing that he didn't get up. She was very angry with him for refusing to see a doctor.

But everyone knew how much he hated doctors. Yes, everyone knew; it was common knowledge among his customers. And he was like a growling bear. Wouldn't see a soul until he was on his feet again. But if he didn't get better soon she was going to risk his anger and take it upon herself to call in a doctor.

One of those who came to the door was the cousin. Henrietta Townes lived a few blocks away and kept close check on Gus' health. She was about the same age as Gus but was the exact opposite in disposition. She demanded to be admitted to see Gus.

"No! Nobody bothers him until he's well again. And nobody includes you, Henrietta!"

Henrietta drew a deep breath, preparatory to launching a tirade. Pamela closed and locked the door in her face.

Behind the drawn blinds of the apartment and the market downstairs the search went on. Roger never left the premises, carefully keeping out of sight when anyone came to the door asking after Gus. He had called the Idleway and quit his job. For, if they found the letter and everything went as planned, who needed a job tending bar?

And if they didn't—

The search intensified. They found bankbooks in the most unlikely places. Gus had had bank accounts all over town. The growing stack of bankbooks was an added incentive to find the letter.

They finally found it in the scooped-out inside of a frozen chicken hanging in the big walk-in meat locker, ready for some unsuspecting housewife to stumble across in the future. There was enough in the letter to send the housewife screaming to the police charging Roger and Pamela with murdering Gus.

"Which is apt. Finding it where we did, I mean. Considering everything," Roger said as they watched the letter burn in an ashtray.

Then they removed Gus from the meat locker, Pamela helping this time since Gus had been frozen stiff for four days, and carried him upstairs to the bathroom. They placed him in the exact position where he died. Roger brought up two electric heaters. He plugged them into wall sockets and made the bathroom as airtight as possible with what they had to work with.

"Now if all this juice load doesn't blow something," Roger said, "we're in business."

It took quite some time and involved Roger popping in and out of the bathroom frequently, testing with a thermometer. But in time they were ready. Roger took out the extra heaters, replaced the cake of soap on which Gus had slipped and ran some water in the stall. Then he left.

The moment he had disappeared into the night, Pamela hurried to the phone and called the police.

THE DETECTIVE who questioned her, a middle-aged man with a tired face, was very considerate. He waited until the body had been removed and then let her tell it in her own way.

"He was sick all week, officer. He didn't believe in going to doctors. Anyone in the neighborhood can tell you that. So I had to take care of him—feed him soup and things like that. He couldn't keep solid food on his stomach. And I had to keep changing the bedclothes, he perspired so.

"I gave him a sponge bath every day. Gus hated that. He kept wanting a shower, but I wouldn't let him. His fever broke last night. He was feeling better today, but very weak. He wanted to take a shower, but I still wouldn't let him. Then I—" Her voice broke. The detective waited patiently. "I hadn't slept very much. I dozed off for a minute in a chair beside the bed. A sound woke me. Gus was gone. I ran into the bathroom and—found him."

Pamela slept quite well that night. She didn't call Roger or try to see him. They had agreed it best to wait until the dust settled. She didn't get up until noon the next day.

In the middle of the afternoon the considerate detective came back. "I have just a few more questions to ask you, Mrs. Cartwright."

Pamela composed herself de-

murely on the couch for the questions.

The detective sat across from her and held an open notebook on his knee. He glanced at it from time to time as he asked his questions.

"Now, Mrs. Cartwright— Last night you said your husband was never out of bed for the four days except for a minute or two? And you fed him only soup and such? Is that right?"

"Yes. Soup, broth, a little custard. Things that wouldn't set heavy on his stomach. Oh, if he would only have had a doctor in!"

"Yes, I've talked to the people in the neighborhood about that. They confirmed the fact that your husband had this phobia about doctors."

Pamela let a dry sob escape. "I shouldn't have listened to him! It's my fault he's dead! I should have called a doctor anyway!"

The detective's gaze was on his notebook. "One of the people we talked to was a relative of the decedent."

Pamela's breath caught. She had forgotten about Henrietta!

"It was through the insistence of Miss Townes that we decided to perform an autopsy this morning," the detective went on. "The autopsy revealed—the body temperature and so forth—that your husband died, as you stated last night, from thirty minutes to an hour before the time we arrived. But the autopsy also told us something else."

His gaze came up. Something had changed in his face. A chill sped down Pamela's spine. She knew instinctively that once this man stumbled onto some fact that didn't fit a logical pattern he would be relentless until he had all the truth.

"It revealed that the decedent had ingested, approximately three hours before death, a large meal. One pound of steak, a large baked potato, one raw tomato and approximately one quarter of an apple pie. And yet you maintain he ate nothing for four days but soup and custard. Perhaps you have an explanation for this, Mrs. Cartwright?"

FOR FASTER SERVICE—USE ZIP CODE NUMBERS! REMEMBER, ZIP NUMBERS ARE PART OF YOUR ADDRESS! AVOID LAST MINUTE RUSH! MAIL EARLY IN THE DAY! IT'S THE FASTER WAY!

The secret intelligence mixup was distinctly on the nightmare side. But where there's a will—

Too Ethical

by T. C. McCLARY

JIM ABLE, the top security man for Operation Unknown, escorted the deaf and dumb courier into The Chief's incredibly unofficial looking office. Behind the somewhat battered but beautiful antique desk The Chief lifted his balding head, scratched his pot belly and peered at the courier through the upper part of silver-rimmed bifocals.

"From U," Able informed him.

The Chief pulled open a drawer and made a slight clucking sound, like a librarian searching for something special. He brought out a metal stylus attached to a small box. The courier unfastened a button and pulled his shirt to both sides, exposing a metal band about his chest. The Chief touched the stylus to a marked circle and watched the light on the box turn from red to green.

The courier smiled slightly, reached inside his shirt and pulled a metal despatch case along the band. Able had a key ready, and The Chief removed a heavy orange envelope. Orange was the color for *Top Urgency.*

The Chief said cantankerously, "Some day that damn thing's going to explode."

"The arrangement's little more than flash powder, sir—chiefly to create fumes that would destroy the chemical paper of the dispatches."

"I don't like hocus pocus," the chief said. "I remember when I was a small boy, the way the oven exploded in Hans and Gretl when they stuffed the witch in."

He nodded and Jim Abel led the courier out by the private panelway that bypassed the other offices. The Chief slit open the envelope and glanced at the typed memo on orange paper.

"As requested. *U.*"

He couldn't recall ever having met U and had no accurate idea of where he might find him in the vast Intelligence complex. But there could be no doubt that he was very close to the top. As The Chief had never communicated with him, and had made no orange request of anybody except for money, he concluded that this matter would brook no delay, and that urgent action was desired.

The Chief glanced through the file, grunting more and more bad-temperedly to himself.

"Why in hell do they have to go back to Hiroshima? Twenty years after Tuckerman wants to raise hell about something that's been forgotten. As if we didn't have enough troubles with Vietnam, Santo Domingo, China, Berlin, and Africa. Why should our greatest senior columnist want to drag up something where half the authorities are dead!"

He rattled the papers and then re-read them more carefully. The top five sheets were recent columns by Arthur Tuckerman, internationally syndicated and world-quoted political columnist for America's leading daily. Tuckerman was big guns. He could raise more deviltry with a line of copy than the Red Viets gunning the air fleet on the ground.

The ghost he was raising was—Who had been responsible for the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki? In each column he repeated that of recent date secret documentation had been declassified, indicating that at least two weeks before the dropping of the first bomb, the Joint Chiefs had been fully aware that Japan's home potential to further supply its war machine had been utterly destroyed by our air sweeps. Their Air Force was knocked out, they could do no more shipping, and their naval and lands forces would, from that date forward, have been defeated by lack of supplies and attrition, if nothing else. Industrially, Japan was already a pile of rubble, and even our daily air sweeps were being discontinued.

Who, therefore, had given the advice and recommendation for the unnecessary bombing of an already smashed and impotent civilian population?

Although the columns left that as a question, there was the definite implication that if a complete answer or investigation was not immediately forthcoming, Tuckerman himself would supply the public with the facts. To risk that, he must already have obtained enough strong documentation to set skeletons rattling in every po-

litical closet, and to shake hell out of America's precarious and delicate current international relations.

The Chief clucked fretfully and murmured, "This will never do."

There was a good deal more involved than simply clarifying a murky and mysterious question out of an era that had been fraught with so many human errors of judgement and impassioned emotion. Point one: At this particular moment, every resource was being strained to create a forthright coexistence with Russia, and Stalin had been kneedeep in the strategy of the atomic bombing. The anti-Communist press would have a field day on that score, and headlines would not necessarily be limited to provable facts. Point two: America's international policies and judgement were not by any means gaining full approval in England at the moment. And one of the very few established facts of the bombing was that Churchill had not been consulted, although he had been so promised at Teheran. The English had protested at the time. It was a matter that could be built into considerable emotion at the present.

"Where do these columnists get their information?" The Chief asked himself. "No ethics. No morals."

He frowned with all the critical disapproval possible for the head of an operation considered so disreputable officially that nobody in government would acknowledge its existence. For Operation Unknown began where U-2 and the CIA left off.

The Chief pushed a button on a panel. When a small light signalled over his door, he buzzed admission. Frank Howard, a middle-aged, weasel-faced assistant recently recovered from an unfriendly area by a virtual commando raid, stood before him. He smiled crookedly at the prospect of fresh intrigue. The smile vanished as he read the columns.

"But Tuckerman's an American in good standing!" Frank Howard muttered.

"Exactly," The Chief agreed.

"And this is here in America, under U.S. laws."

"Rather a poser, isn't it?" The Chief fretted. "Nevertheless, we have to obtain whatever documentation he possesses. He'll probably have photostats, but he won't dare use them without the originals."

Howard shook his head. "I know Tuckerman. He'll have the originals buried. He won't have them in his possession until the day he means to use the material."

The Chief swung in his swivel chair to look out of the windows. He made steeples of his fingers. "It is the first time we've been requested to operate in this country. It makes it a problem. Also, he's a good citizen, not a spy."

"The FBI are not going to like

it if a good citizen is abducted for a private talk."

"I'm afraid they won't. Tuckerman is a favorite over there."

"So who covers me?"

"Ah, that is the question." The Chief sighed. "Tuckerman will realize the situation, of course. He'll just laugh at us."

"Up to a point," Howard said. He splayed his judo-toughened fingers and looked at them.

"When we reach that point, we are really in the soup," The Chief said dismally. "It's one thing to persuade a bad character or spy to cooperate. It is something else to use extra-legal methods on one of our most popular columnists. He is sure to protest—loudly."

"You don't think our friends the Russians cooked this up to put this operation on the spot?"

"I think we are on the spot, and very hot, but I don't think they had anything to do with it. They have more to lose than anybody if this thing gets stormed up. They'd get blamed for the slaughter of an enemy they didn't even fight. We, at least, were trying to terminate an active war."

"We dropped the Hiroshima bomb on August sixth. The Russians stalled in declaring war on Japan until August eight," Howard recalled. "Looks like they could have made the bomb the price of their coming in, then waited to make sure it was dropped!"

"I imagine that's what Tuckerman is leading up to. If he's got a wisp of proof, nothing will stop him from using it. He's carrying on a one-man Cold War all of his own. He doesn't love the Communists like brothers."

"Well, they sure don't love him either," Howard grunted. "That MVD I extinguished in Beirut let it slip that K-two section keeps special experts on him."

"Is that so?" The Chief asked with the bright interest of a college prexy hearing some dirt on a rival college. "They think he's that important? Maybe we can learn something from them."

He swung back and beamed at Howard. "It might relieve the situation if it works. Let's see, we have an agent in their K-two archives."

"Steppanovich," Frank Howard nodded. "But he's suspected. He's under surveillance."

"No matter. Have Victor Gregory code a message for him to brief us on their Tuckerman dossier. And have him make up three facsimile sets of those columns and deliver them here to me, personally."

Howard frowned slightly at the columns in his hand and hesitated. "Perhaps Security didn't inform you, sir. Gregory's under surveillance here. It's possible he's an informant for MVD."

"Of course he is," The Chief agreed amiably. "That's why I hired him. He'll have those columns over to their Embassy as fast as he can get them there."

"You want them to know?" Howard grunted with surprise.

"But naturally. *We* can't decently kidnap and force an honest American, can we?"

"Ah!" Howard gave his twisted smile.

"And let's see—" The Chief murmured. "Tuckerman won't have those original documentations at his house or office. But he'll have to transport them from or to somewheres when he's ready to declare war. You might just watch his daily column. When he implies he's going to spill if an investigation isn't forthcoming, keep a tail on him."

"And intercept him? But the Russians will already be on him!"

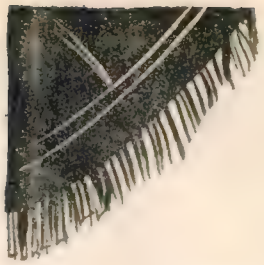
"Howard," The Chief said very softly—soft as the shadow of death. "The Russians will intercept him and grab the documents. You will jump the Russians—and you can use any tricks you want."

Howard turned beet red at his stupidity, and mumbled assent.

"Quite all right, my boy," The Chief said forgivingly. "You bear out what the foreigners say of us. We just don't understand intrigue. We're too ethical."

Featuring

MIKE SHAYNE



PRESSURE PLAY

There were two things about the case that weighed heavily on Shayne's mind. The murder weapon had no right to become invisible and the kidnap angle was seven-ways strange.

by BRETT HALLIDAY

LUCKY HAMILTON opened the door and stepped back as Mike Shayne strode into her apartment. The redhead tossed his panama onto the couch and turned to look at his pert secretary where she now stood with her back against the closed door. Shayne's grey eyes were alert but worried as he looked at Lucy. He had rarely seen Lucy so distraught. Her brown eyes looked frightened and red with crying.

"Easy, Angel," Shayne said. "Now be calm and start at the top. Who's gone?"

"Michael, he's been kidnapped, I just know it!" Lucy blurted, tears welling up again in her eyes.

"Kidnapped is a hard word, Angel," Shayne said, "and there has to be a reason for a kidnapping. All you said on the phone was that someone was missing, gone. Now, take it easy. There's no hurry. Let's start with the details."

The brown-eyed girl nodded.

© 1965, by Brett Halliday

"All right, Michael. Well, she left the boy—"

"Whoa, Angel. Maybe you better sit down and have a good drink to calm down before we start."

Lucy smiled wanly. "All right, Michael. It might help."

Shayne nodded and went to pour two brandies. He gave a glass to Lucy and sat down to sip his own. He watched her as she drank, more concerned than he would have wanted her to suspect. Her voice on the telephone had been almost incoherent. Alarmed, the detective had dressed rapidly and driven through the Miami night as fast as he could to reach her.

She looked up at him and her eyes were dry, her manner more her normal, efficient self. "I'm sorry, Michael, but I was almost frantic," Lucy said. "She trusted me, and now he's gone. She should have been back hours ago. She only went to meet George."

"From the beginning, Angel," Shayne said, "and step by step. Okay?"

Lucy Hamilton nodded, shaking her pretty head as if to clear it. Only then did Shayne notice the faint trickle of blood on her hairline just in front of her right ear. He sat up straight, swearing.

"You're hurt! Why didn't—"

"I was knocked out, but I'm all right now. It's only a scratch, but the bump's like an ostrich egg," Lucy said.

Shayne was grim. "Maybe you better get to the story, Angel. You forgot to mention that you'd been struck on the head."

"I'm so confused, Michael." Lucy's voice was tremulous. "You see, I was worried about Mildred anyway. There I go again. You don't know the Millers, do you? Well, they're George and Mildred Miller, and they live upstairs. I don't know them too well; they only moved in six months ago. But Mildred and I had become friendly lately. They have a little boy, Peter. I took care of the boy a couple of times for Mildred. George is an art dealer, and Mildred does work for him sometimes."

"I suppose it's Peter Miller who is missing?" the redheaded detective said.

Lucy nodded. "George often works in his gallery on Saturdays, and Mildred brought the boy down about two o'clock this afternoon. She said she had to do something for George. She had to meet him, and I agreed to mind Peter until she returned at five. Well, she did not come back. By nine o'clock I was very worried, so I called their apartment. I got no answer, so I called George's gallery.

"They told me he was working late, but he wasn't there then, and neither was Mildred, so I left a message. I put Peter to bed in my bedroom. He didn't seem to mind, but by ten o'clock I was very worried. I began to wonder if some-

thing else had happened to George and Mildred, and—"

Shayne sat alert. "Something else?"

"George had a bad accident recently, a hit-and-run driver. He was in the hospital for three weeks. He's all right now, but he's still bandaged up."

Shayne nodded. "Go on, Angel."

"Well, I suppose I was so worried I became careless. I went in to check on Peter, and when I came out I didn't notice that the lights were out at first. Just as I did notice, I was hit on the head. When I came to, Peter was gone. The door was open. That's when I called you."

"The door was open? Then the boy could have wandered out. How old is he?"

"About five, Michael. But if he wasn't taken, who hit me and why?"

Shayne looked around the neat apartment, for some indication that it might have been searched. Not an ashtray was out of place.

"Nothing stolen?" Shayne asked.

"No, Michael," Lucy said.

"And no problem getting in. You have a fire escape, and I expect the window was open."

"It was," Lucy said.

"How long were you in with the boy?"

"Perhaps two minutes, or three."

Shayne tugged on his earlobe. Then whoever it was moved fast. You haven't called the police yet?"

Lucy shook her head. "I called you first. I—I didn't know what to do. I was waiting for George or Mildred to call back, or—"

The ring of the doorbell was loud and insistent. Whoever was ringing was anxious to be admitted. When it continued to ring Shayne jumped up, and crossed to the door.

The man who stood in the hall was tall and slender. His handsome face was partly covered with a large bandage. His right arm was in a large cast and carried in a black sling. He was about forty, and he limped as he hurried past Shayne into the room.

"Miss Hamilton!" the man cried. "You called me! Is it about Mildred? Do you—"

"Hold it," Shayne snapped. "You're George Miller?"

The man looked at Shayne. "I am. Who the devil are you?"

Lucy jumped up eagerly. "This is Mr. Shayne, George. My employer. I called him as soon as Petey was taken. If anyone can help he can. He thinks we should call the police."

The tall man stared at Shayne. For a long minute he said nothing. He opened his mouth to speak, and closed it again. There was a look on his face that made Lucy lower her eyes, and then glance almost pleadingly at Shayne.

"What's that? Petey? Taken?"

Miller said, incredulously. "Taken where? Where has Petey been taken? Has Mildred—"

Shayne stepped toward the tall art dealer. "Mr. Miller, it looks very much as if your son has been kidnapped."

Miller blinked. "Kidnapped? Petey? I don't believe you!"

"We're not sure, but it looks that way, George," Lucy said. "Someone struck me on the head and I lost consciousness. When I came to, Petey was gone. I'm so sorry, George. I waited and waited for Mildred."

Shayne was watching the tall man. Miller seemed stunned, paralyzed, his broken arm moving jerkily inside the black sling. Shayne tugged slowly on his earlobe.

"Mr. Miller, I could see that you didn't know your son was missing until a moment ago, when Lucy told you. You asked if it was about your wife that Lucy had called you earlier. Hasn't your wife been with you today?"

Miller seemed to collapse all at once into a heavy armchair. The tall art dealer looked up at Shayne.

"No, she never showed up at all," Miller said. "I'm afraid Mildred is missing, too!"

II

IN THE SILENCE of Lucy Hamilton's apartment, Shayne took out a cigarette and lighted it. Lucy had gone to the tall man and stood over him, her hand on his shoulder. Miller blinked again as if trying to think. Then he looked up at Shayne.

"Shayne? Mike Shayne? The private detective?" Miller said.

He turned to Lucy. "You never mentioned you worked for a detective, Miss Hamilton."

"Perhaps it's a lucky thing I do," Lucy said.

"Yes," Miller agreed, nodding. "You will help, won't you, Mr. Shayne? I mean, I don't understand any of this. I'm not rich. I run a small art gallery. Why would anyone kidnap my son? And where is Mildred? She was supposed to meet me this afternoon, but she never came. She's not home. And now Petey is gone."

Shayne tugged hard on his left ear lobe, and blew a long cloud of smoke into the silent air of the apartment. The questions the injured art dealer was asking were the same questions he had been asking himself. Kidnappers usually had someting to gain, something they wanted from the family of the kidnapped child.

"Kidnappers don't always want money, Mr. Miller," Shayne said slowly. "Can you think of anything anyone wants from you? Something they want to extort from you?"

"I told you—I'm a nobody!" Miller said.

"A painting, maybe?" Shayne persisted. "Some business advan-

tage? It doesn't have to be very big or even very important—not in itself. It just has to be important to someone."

Miller laughed harshly. "Shayne, I handle second-rate painters, new and old. I never touched a canvas worth more than five hundred dollars. Who would risk kidnapping a child for that kind of money?"

"Revenge? Have you any real enemies you've hurt?"

"Not that I know of."

Shayne looked at Miller's bandages and broken arm. "What about your accident? Was it an accident? Lucy said it was hit-and-run," he said. "Hit-and-run can be deliberate."

Miller shook his head. "I don't know, Shayne. I was crossing the street, and a speeding car hit me. That's all I know. The police are working on it."

Shayne began to pace the apartment. No enemies, no money, nothing valuable, and no business in-fighting—but Lucy had been struck a violent blow on the head and the boy was gone. So, apparently, was the wife, Mildred Miller.

Shayne looked down at George Miller. "What about your wife?" he said bluntly.

"My wife? Mildred? I—" Miller began.

"She's missing, and the boy's missing," Shayne pointed out. "Have you two been getting along? Is there any reason she would run out and take the kid?"

Miller bristled. "Of course not! It's more likely the same person has both of them! Why would Mildred attack Miss Hamilton just to steal her own son! All she had to do was walk in and take him away!"

"Maybe to give herself time, confuse the issue," Shayne said drily. "It's been done. We look for kidnappers while she vanishes with the boy so you can't find them."

Miller was about to protest again, but Shayne stopped him with a wave of his hand.

"I'll accept your word that you and Mildred get along fine for now," the redhead said. "You consider it likely that the same person has both of them. I agree. Which brings us to the last possibility—did Mrs. Miller have any enemies, or friends, who might want something from her?"

The tall art dealer blinked up at Shayne, hesitated.

"Damn it, Miller," Shayne exploded, "your son and wife are missing! There has to be some reason!"

"I can't think of one, Shayne," Miller said. "I've told you all I know."

"If we don't have a lead, Miller, I'll have to call the police. I should anyway, but this doesn't have the feel of a real kidnapping. It suggests more a 'pressure' move, a weapon in a deal of some kind.

If it is, you don't want the police in it yet."

Miller nodded, his lips tightly compressed. Suddenly he seemed to come to a decision about something he'd been keeping back, for a troubled look came into his eyes.

"Just one thing, Shayne, Mildred has been acting odd lately. She got in with some religious group about six months ago. The leader seems to have some power over her. It's cost me plenty, I'll tell you. Small amounts of cash, always cash, every couple of weeks. Donations he calls them. But he knows how little money I have."

"Reverend Ullman!" Lucy Hamilton burst out. "She talked about him! I remember she said she was going to see him today!"

Miller nodded. "The Reverend Ullman, is a faith healer quack! I've never met him, but I believe every one of the ugly rumors I've heard about the man."

"Ullman," Shayne said. "Anyone else?"

Again Miller hesitated, shrugged. "A man named Kingsley. I don't know anything about him except that she met him at Ullman's place, at one of their damned sessions, I think. It's probably nothing, but this Kingsley did call the apartment a few times asking for Mildred. I didn't like his voice."

"But neither of them have put any pressure on you or your wife?" Shayne asked.

"Not on me, Shayne, but I can't say about Mildred," Miller said, and the bandaged man's eyes stared steadily up at Shayne. "She has seemed—well, nervous lately. Have you noticed that, Miss Hamilton?"

Lucy nodded. "Yes, I have! And she was nervous today, now that you mention it! Michael, I believe she's in some kind of trouble! Shouldn't we call the police?"

Shayne tugged on his earlobe. "Maybe we should, Angel. But it might be better if we waited until we've more to go on. Time enough when they ask for ransom—if they do. What about it, Miller? It's your son."

"If it's some scheme to put pressure on Mildred, then the kidnappers are probably professional criminals. Is that right?"..

"Probably," Shayne agreed.

"And they would have no reason to harm Peter if they get what they want?"

"That's the way I see it," Shayne said.

"Then I say no police, not yet," Miller said. "I want my boy back."

Shayne narrowed his grey eyes. "And your wife?"

Miller nodded, said, "And my wife. No matter what she may be mixed up in."

"Agreed," Shayne said. "Now both of you stay put until I get back. I'll call in every hour or so in case the kidnappers contact you. Give me Ullman's address, Miller."

II

MIKE SHAYNE strode from Lucy Hamilton's apartment, leaving his brown-eyed secretary comforting the ashen-faced George Miller. Mildred Miller had been nervous today, and she had been going to see the "Reverend" Ullman.

The Blood Of Lambs Sanctuary, Reverend Thomas Ullman, Leader of The Innocents, boasted eternal vigil and aid, perpetual welcome—in gaudy neon letters that blazed in the dark Miami night even at the late hour. The neon blinked on and off like the come-on sign of a roadside motel.

Shayne parked across the tree-shaded street from the low, stucco building, cut his motor and sat in the dark, studying the place. The building was set on a small, grassy plot in the center of a large clump of palmettoes. It was doing little business at this hour, but Mike Shayne could hear the faint but definite sound of soft organ music.

He got out of his car and crossed the street quickly and silently. At the door to the low Sanctuary building he stopped. The interior was dim but lighted by a soft greenish glow—and the organ music was louder now as he opened the door and stepped inside. The interior was deserted.

It was a single long room with a flower-bedecked altar at the far end. The glow came from the altar itself, and was powerful enough to bathe the whole room in a macabre green light. There was no organist in sight, and, for that matter, no organ. The music came steadily and insistently from small loudspeakers concealed behind potted palms along the walls.

"Welcome to The Blood Of Lambs Sanctuary. Are you Innocent?"

The voice came from nowhere and everywhere at once. A low, soft, comforting voice. A voice with the warmth of a soft hand on a fevered brow, and yet with the firm offer of fatherly strength in its manly tone. Whatever else he was, Shayne decided, the Reverend Ullman was a pro.

"Join us, Innocent. Kneel and find peace. Here there is always peace and health. Rest and comfort your soul."

Shayne did not look for the source of the voice. It came through another series of loudspeakers. His keen eyes had seen the line of light beneath a closed door to the rear left of the glowing green altar.

He turned quickly and strode to the door. It opened, and he walked into a small office. The man behind the desk looked up as Shayne came in. The man pushed away the microphone in front of him and smiled.

"Welcome, my friend. Do you seek help?"

The man was small and thin. A smooth man. His size did not at all fit the deep voice that came from him. He was dressed now in a rumpled old suit, but on a stand behind the desk Shayne saw a set of magnificent white satin robes that would have awed the devil himself.

"You're Ullman?" Shayne said as he strode to the desk.

The small man eyed Shayne up and down. He had become wary. His eyes had gone cold. Suddenly there was a large automatic in his thin hand. Shayne froze where he stood. The "Reverend" Ullman had the look of a man who had held a gun before—and used it.

"You're from Kingsley?" Ullman said.

The small man stood up and moved around the desk. Ullman moved lightly on the balls of his feet. The smile returned to his face, and he moved without an ounce of wasted motion. He stood behind Shayne and expertly patted the redhead, searching for a gun.

Shayne had no gun this time. He had been almost ready for bed when Lucy Hamilton had called. Ullman turned him around and sat grinning on the edge of the ornate desk.

"Well, you aren't from Kingsley," he said. "His boys take a bath with their weapons, I hear."

"You're expecting Kingsley's boys?" Shayne asked.

"With Kingsley you expect anything," Ullman said. "All right, my friend, what do you want? Salvation?"

"Information," Shayne said.

"Salvation is safer," Ullman said.

Shayne did not smile. He was thinking about this belligerant evangelist who handled a gun like an expert, and a man named Kingsley who had "boys". His hunch was looking righter and righter every moment. But how was Mildred Miller involved, and why had the boy been taken?

"A woman named Mildred Miller," Shayne said. "Her husband wants her. He wants his son, too."

"The Lord disposes, my friend. Mr. Miller wants a lot," Ullman said, the perpetual smile still on his thin face.

"Mrs. Miller seems to have been one of your flock," Shayne said. "She also seems to be missing."

"My flock is legion, my friend," Ullman said.

"Miller," Shayne said.

"Who did you say sent you? Perhaps, after all, you do come from Kingsley. Yes, perhaps you do," he added, leaning toward Shayne, and keeping the automatic steadily trained on the detective's stomach. "What can you tell me? You asked your questions, now you may answer some, eh? Who sent you to me?"

"The lady's husband," Shayne said simply. "He wants his wife."

"What do you want?" Ullman said.

"What does Kingsley want?"

The evangelist stopped smiling. His thin lips clamped tight, then curled into a sneer. For an instant Ullman remained like that. Then he moved back, and sat dangling his leg on the edge of the desk.

"Miller? I remember her. A female of little faith. Alas, she looked for peace and I tried to help. But even I can't save them all."

"Did you try to help her today?"

"Today? I can't seem to remember."

The thin man sat and smiled. Shayne watched him. The detective let his glance move slowly, casually around the neat office. There was nothing unusual, nothing that gave Shayne a hint of what the Ullman could be mixed up in. On the desk there were only the microphone, a set of switches that clearly controlled the loudspeakers and lights in the chapel outside, and an appointment pad. Shayne saw writing on the pad.

"No," Ullman said, "the Miller woman is a disappointment. I tried, but she just does not have the call."

Shayne leaned casually over the desk. The writing on the pad was upside down. Two words and some numbers. Shayne craned his neck. *La Casablanca, 38.*

"Go away, my friend, you are chasing a very wild goose," Ullman said.

Shayne turned to face the little man. "Or the White House, friend," he said.

Ullman stood up. His face had gone pale under the bravado.

"What the devil do you know about—"

Shayne broke in. "I know that kidnapping is a bad deal, Ullman, a real bad deal. Did they tell you it was going to be kidnapping!"

Ullman waved the automatic. "Kidnapping? Who said kidnapping? I know nothing about kidnapping!"

Shayne laughed. "Maybe not, friend. But you'll burn just the same if you're mixed up in it! Maybe you better just find out."

Ullman stopped shouting. He nodded, grew grim. "Yes, perhaps I better," he said.

Before Shayne could move the evangelist stepped close and swung the automatic hard. It struck Shayne cleanly across the side of his head above the ear. He crumpled to the floor and rolled over on his face.

IV

MIKE SHAYNE sat up. His head pounded, and he blinked his eyes to clear away the green fog that seemed to be swirling in eddies around him. The fog lifted but the green did not fade.

He was lying on the floor of the *The Blood Of Lambs Sanctuary.*

Shayne listened. There was no sound. The organ music from the loudspeakers had stopped. He looked at his watch. It was just past midnight. He had been unconscious for not more than twenty minutes.

Shayne struggled to his feet, swayed, and held onto a pew to keep himself from crumpling to the floor again. He looked around. Nothing moved and there was no sound.

The line of light still shined from under the door into Ullman's office. Shayne stepped lightly to the door. If he had been left in the chapel, there would probably be nothing to find in the office. Ullman had the air of a careful man. But it would do no harm to look. He opened the door carefully and stepped inside.

The office was exactly as he had left it when he had been knocked out. Even to Ullman behind the desk.

Ullman who still grinned.

But Ullman was dead.

Shayne stared at the skinny little man who sat dead in his own desk chair. A side door Shayne had not noticed earlier stood open, showing how Ullman's visitor had come and gone. Shayne guessed that Ullman had dragged him out into the chapel before his visitor arrived—which had probably saved his life. The murderous visitor had not seen Shayne.

Shayne walked to the dead evangelist. Ullman had been shot once in the chest at close range. The bullet had passed through the man and the chair. Ullman's auto-

matic lay on the desk in front of him, its safety catch off and ready. But the dead man had never used it. Shayne bent and sniffed without touching the gun. It had not been fired.

The detective straightened up and studied the desk. The appointment pad was gone. The entire pad. Shayne stood for a long minute looking down. Then he picked up the telephone.

Less than twenty minutes later Chief Will Gentry and his men were swarming over the now brightly lighted chapel. In the late Ullman's office the Medical Examiner was at work, and Gentry was scowling at Shayne with no attempt to conceal his annoyance.

"Since when do we keep the lid on a kidnapping, Mike?" the Miami Chief of Police snapped.

"We don't, Will," Shayne said, "but this isn't a kidnapping, not in the usual sense. I'll take an oath on that. Ullman here, and a guy named Kingsley, are mixed up in something. The Miller woman fits in somewhere. For all I know the kid's with her."

"For all you know the kid's dead!" Gentry said. "What do you really know?"

"Nothing," Shayne admitted.

"Any ransom demands?"

"Not that I know. I tried to get Miller on the phone after I called you. There was no answer. I called Lucy and she said his apartment seemed empty."

"Maybe they snatched him, too," Gentry said acidly.

"Maybe," Shayne said.

Gentry scratched his chin as he looked toward where the Medical Examiner worked over the body of Ullman.

"You said you didn't think Ullman knew about the kidnapping?"

Shayne nodded. "I think I hit him hard with it. I figure he must have howled to his visitor and wanted out. So the visitor killed him."

"Wanted out of what?" Gentry asked.

"That's what I don't know," Shayne said.

Gentry turned away in disgust just as the Medical Examiner stood up from the body and motioned for his men to take it away.

"Shot once in the heart," he said. "Bullet entered high, came out low and went on through the chair and into the floor. Close range. Dead maybe thirty-forty minutes, no more."

"Thanks a lot," Gentry said. "I could see that myself."

"A simple one," the Medical Examiner said as he put on his coat and picked up his bag of instruments. "Regular thirty-eight, I'd say. Probably a police-special, short barrelled. If I get any more at the autopsy, I'll tell you. Goodnight."

Chief Gentry sourly watched the Medical Examiner leave. Then he turned back to Shayne.

"All right, Mike, now what about this Kingsley? You got a first name?"

"No, but Ullman was worried about Kingsley, and Kingsley has hired guns," Shayne said. "You got any ideas, Will?"

Gentry looked thoughtful. "One. Evan Kingsley, runs a big trucking outfit. He makes money but he lives better, you know? We've had an eye on him for years, but he comes out clean so far."

"He imports stuff? Smuggling?" Shayne said.

Gentry shook his head. "No, interstate trucking, all inside the country. What we had in mind was hi-jacking, plain and fancy. We got word a year or so ago some of the Mafia brothers were peeved with him, but we couldn't get a whisper. He's still alive, so I guess the Mafia couldn't prove anything either."

"Mind if I try?" Shayne said.

"Go ahead, we'll be busy here a while. There's a lot of area to search," Gentry said. "Only, Mike, tell me about anything you find this time. Okay?"

Shayne nodded and left the room. He did not bother to tell Gentry that he had not told the Chief everything even now. He had left out the missing appointment pad, and the *La Casablance, 38*. Gentry had a murder, but it was still the kidnapping that was on Shayne's mind. He was more sure than ever that young Peter Miller had been abducted for some other reason than ransom. And somehow it had to involve Mildred Miller. The boy was pressure on the woman, Shayne was sure of that. But how and why?

He walked out of the chapel, gaudy now in bright light as Gentry's men went over it inch by inch, and crossed the grass toward his car. He was thinking about how different the Ullmans were from the many sincere evangelists he had known. In the dark night a voice called.

"Mr. Shayne!"

Directly behind his car there was another car. Shayne stepped warily to the second car. The pale and bandaged face of George Miller looked out at him, haggard with strain.

Shayne tugged on his earlobe. "How long have you been here?" he snapped.

"Just before the police arrived," Miller said.

"You followed me?" Shayne said. "Why?"

"No, I didn't follow you, I came looking for you," the tall art dealer said. "I waited, but you didn't come back, so I came over here. I saw your car, so I knew you were with Ullman. Then the two men came out, and—"

Shayne watched Miller. "Two men?"

"Yes. A short, fat man, and a big guy. They came from around the building somewhere and got into a car. I was going to go in and

look for you when the police arrived."

"It's a nice story," Shayne said. "If it happened."

"What else do you think happened?" Miller said.

"You were here," Shayne said. "Maybe you killed Ullman."

Miller stared up. "Ullman's dead?"

"The cops aren't having a social in there," Shayne said.

Miller blinked. "Will that help me find Peter and Mildred?"

Shayne frowned. "I suppose not."

"Have you learned anything?"

Shayne turned away. "I'll tell you later. Go get some sleep."

He left Miller sitting in his car and returned to his own car. He decided it was time to take his own advice. There was nothing else he could do tonight. He watched George Miller pull away and drive past him. The tall man drove awkwardly with his left hand only, the right arm heavy in its cast.

Shayne drove after Miller. He followed until he saw the art dealer turn into Lucy's building. Then he drove on to his own apartment. In the morning he would tackle Kingsley and his 'boys.'

V

THE SUN STREAMED in his window as Mike Shayne awoke. He lay in bed and smoked a cigarette and thought about Ullman, and Kingsley, and the Miller family. When he got around to thinking about *La Casablanca, 38,* he reached for the telephone. He told Pete on the desk to get the *Miami Daily News.* He told the switchboard of the newspaper to ring Tim Rourke.

"It's Sunday, Mike, the day of rest," Rourke said.

"Murder doesn't rest, Tim," Shayne said to his friend.

"So I hear," Rourke said from the other end of the telephone line. "Not even for keepers of the flock. We lost a Lamb last night, Gentry tells me."

"One of the not-so-innocent," Shayne said. "Tim, I need some help. Get me a run-down on Ullman, Evan Kingsley, Mildred Miller, and George Miller. And find out if *La Casablanca, thirty-eight,* means anything."

"I'll do my best, Mike," Rourke promised. "But I don't have to run-

down on Kingsley. He's notorious, but unconvicted. He doesn't have bodyguards or gunmen, but his clerks, bookkeepers and gardeners look like hired killers almost to a man. A couple of them haven't been as careful as Kingsley himself, and they've got records Dillinger would have envied. If you go against him, watch out for Mario Greco."

"Thanks, Tim, I will. And get back to me with anything you have on the others."

"It's Sunday, but I'll do my best," Rourke said.

Shayne hung up and went to shower and shave. After a breakfast of a half-dozen eggs, scrambled soft, he went down to his car. Evan Kingsley's address was more than a good one. It was elegant. The trucker had done well.

Shayne parked in front of the big, sprawling house. A butler led him around the house to the swimming pool.

Rourke had been more than right. The butler looked like a large tackle, and moved like a small cat. The gardener leaned on a power mower on the wide lawn and watched Shayne. It was a hot morning, but he wore a jacket, buttoned and faintly bulging. A man in a chauffer's uniform lounged fully dressed in a beach chair near the pool.

Evan Kingsley himself was a short, fat man attired in a striped beach robe over tropical shorts. He was not alone beside the shining blue water of the pool.

A good-looking, but not spectacular, blonde lay in a deck chair beside Kingsley's chair. She wore a black bathing suit, sun-glasses, and a wide, floppy straw hat. She glanced once at Shayne and then looked away. The third member of the trio did not look away. He stared at Shayne.

The third member was a big man, very big. Muscles bulged all over his tanned torso. He wore a pair of brief swim trunks that looked about ready to split. He watched Shayne like a bird of prey. It was the muscle man who spoke first. He spoke to the butler who stood beside, and a half step behind, Shayne.

"What's he want, Max?" the muscle man said.

Before the butler could answer, Mike Shayne said, "Are you Kingsley?"

"No," the muscle man said.

"Then I don't want you," Shayne said, and turned to face the fat man.

The muscle man reddened. "Why you punk—"

"Be quiet, Mario," the fat man said. "Mario is a bit uncouth, Mr. —"

"The name's Shayne. I've got a few questions, Kingsley," he said to the fat man.

Kingsley rubbed his paunch. "Shayne, eh? Yes, I've heard of you. You're a big man, aren't you?

I wonder if you could handle Mario there?"

Kingsley indicated the muscle man with a nod of his head. Shayne looked again at Mario Greco. Greco looked strong enough to stop a train, but the big man was muscle bound.

Shayne had no doubt that he could handle him in a fight. But Tim Rourke would not warn him against a strong-arm type. Shayne guessed that Greco's muscles hid more deadly techniques and a sharp mind.

"In a fair fight, yes," Shayne said, "only I'll bet Mario doesn't fight fair."

Greco grinned for the first time. Kingsley laughed.

"You have good eyes," Kingsley said. "What's on your mind, Mr. Shayne? Has one of my drivers been picked up for speeding?"

Shayne was about to come right to the point of Peter Miller's kidnapping, and the murder of Ullman, when he had a sudden hunch. Kingsley had a lot of drivers on his payroll.

"Not speeding, but how about hit-and-run?" Shayne said slowly. "Miller just remembered it was one of your trucks that—"

He got no farther. The hunch struck home like a blow between the eyes. All three of them recoiled as if they had been struck. The woman went rigid. Greco half rose from his deck chair. Evan Kingsley began to sweat.

Then Kingsley motioned Mario Greco to sit back in his chair. Greco sat back. The woman opened her make-up case and began to work on her face.

Kingsley watched Shayne. "All right, Mr. Shayne, you made a point. What do you know about Miller," he said. "Did he send you here?"

"In a way," Shayne said. "He wants his wife back."

"Good for him," Kingsley said. "What else? Mike Shayne doesn't usually chase run-away wives."

"Is that what she is?" Shayne said.

"What do you think?" Kingsley asked.

"I think she's in trouble. People who know her get hurt, even dead," Shayne said.

Kingsley blinked in the sun. "Dead?"

"That's what Ullman was the last time I looked," Shayne said.

This time they did not jump or even twitch. They just froze. Greco looked at Kingsley. Kingsley looked at the woman. The woman looked at Shayne. A thick smear of bright red lipstick stood out like blood on her cheek where her hand had jerked when Shayne said that Ullman was dead. Kingsley looked steadily at the redhead, his brow filmed with sweat.

"When?" Kingsley said.

"Last night," Shayne said, "only you boys know that. You were there. You were seen."

Mario Greco burst out. "Okay we was there. Only we wasn't inside, see? We was watching the little punk. When the cops come we beat it."

Kingsley was cool. "Be quiet, Mario. Let Mr. Shayne talk."

Then the woman spoke for the first time. She had carefully put away her makeup after repairing the lipstick smear. Now she turned to look at Kingsley.

"You didn't tell me about Ullman," she said to the fat man.

Kingsley waved an irritable hand. "We didn't know. As Mario says, we just watched. When the police came, we left. There were two other cars at the Sanctuary. Anyway, what do you care about Ullman?"

The woman seemed to think for a moment, and then shrugged. Kingsley turned back to Shayne.

"Is that all you have on your mind, Shayne?" Kingsley said sharply. "I mean, if you had anything on me for Ullman, Gentry would've been camping on my lawn at dawn."

"Well," Shayne said. "If you don't like hit-and-run, and you don't buy murder, how about a little kidnapping?"

"Kidnapping?" Kingsley said.

"I'm looking for the boy as well as the wife," Shayne said. "When Mildred Miller did a runaway, did she decide she had to take Petey Miller with her?"

Greco was the first to move. The big man waved to the butler and chauffeur who had been hovering just out of earshot all this time. The woman had sat up straight on the edge of her deck chair. Kingsley stood up slowly.

"Kidnapping?" the woman said.

"Get out of here, Shayne. Now!" Kingsley said, no longer suave.

"Take him out," Mario Greco said to the butler and chauffeur.

Shayne went. With the butler on one side, and the chauffeur on the other, Shayne looked back only once. He saw the woman standing up. Kingsley and Greco were talking to her. The two men were talking hard. The woman just stood there. Shayne began to tug slowly

on his earlobe as he walked to his car.

The butler and chauffeur watched his car until he was out of sight of the big house.

But Shayne was not thinking of the butler or the chauffeur. He was not even thinking of Kingsley or Mario Greco. He was thinking about the blonde woman. A sudden suspicion was shirling around in his head. He was wondering if Mildred Miller was a good-looking, but not spectacular, blonde.

VI

GEORGE MILLER was with Lucy Hamilton in the brown-eyed secretary's apartment. Shayne walked in, tossed his panama on the sofa, and sat down with his long legs stretched out before him. Lucy looked at him curiously.

"You've found something, Michael?" Lucy said.

Miller said eagerly. "Have you found them, Shayne? Mildred and Petey? Have you?"

Shayne tugged on his ear. "What does Mildred look like, Miller? Tallish, blonde, about thirty-three, a nice figure but maybe not so young anymore?"

Miller nodded. "Yes! You've found her?"

"I found her," Shayne said. "Or, let's say, I've seen her."

And Petey, Michael?" Lucy said.

Shayne shook his head. "Not yet, Angel."

He did not go on to say what he felt—that he had the distinct feeling that Petey Miller was not with his mother. Or, at least, that if the boy was with Mildred Miller, she had not told Kingsley or Greco.

"Where did you see her, Shayne?" Miller asked slowly.

"With Kingsley," Shayne said bluntly, and he went on to explain what had happened at Kingsley's house. "It looks to me like that hit-and-run was more than an accident. You're sure it was a car and not a truck that hit you?"

"A car. I saw that much," Miller said. "A black car. I didn't get the make, or the license, or see any faces."

"Is that important, Michael?" Lucy asked.

"It could be, Angel," Shayne said. "If Kingsley tried to kill Miller he must have wanted Mildred real bad. Maybe badly enough to kidnap the boy to twist her arm even more. The only question is, does Kingsley just want your wife, Miller, or is there something more to it? Does he want her to do something?"

Miller paced the floor, his broken arm moving inside the sling. He limped as he paced. His face was grey.

"I don't know, Shayne," Miller said, "but there still hasn't been any ransom contact. No contact at all."

Shayne nodded. "It's my hunch that Mildred doesn't have the boy

herself, but she knows now where he is. And I've still got a hunch that there's more to this than I know yet."

"What can we do, Michael?" Lucy asked.

"For now, nothing," Shayne said. "You two sit tight. Has Rourke tried to get me here, Angel?"

"No, no one has called," Lucy said.

"All right, stay by the telephone," Shayne said. "I'll still keep in touch."

"I'll walk out with you," Miller said.

Shayne left the apartment with George Miller walking beside him. The tall man limped down the hall toward the elevators with Shayne. Miller seemed to have something on his mind. When they reached the elevators, Miller hesitated again before he spoke.

"Are you going back to get Mildred?" Miller said.

"That might not be easy," Shayne said drily. "And she did not look like she was being held by force, Miller. No, I think the next thing I have to do is try to find out just what she's mixed up in."

Miller nodded. "Do you think she knew that Petey had been taken by someone?"

"I'm not sure. I'll say one thing for her, I think she was really surprised about Ullman's murder. I can't say if she knew about the boy or not. But she knows now."

"Yes," Miller said, "she knows now. Maybe she'll call me."

"Maybe," the redheaded detective said.

"I think I'll go to my apartment and wait," Miller said.

The elevator came and Shayne took it down. He was thinking about George Miller and Mildred Miller lying on a deck chair beside the swimming pool. It was almost certain that Miller's accident had been no accident. And yet Shayne could not see Evan Kingsley trying to kill a man just to get his wife. Women would come easily to Kingsley, and Mildred Miller was pretty, but not that pretty. Then there was the boy. The kidnapped boy was still the key. Only the key to what?

In his car Shayne drove downtown until he reached Flagler Street and his office building. He went up the elevator in the deserted building, its halls echoing to his footfalls on this Sunday afternoon. The telephone was ringing as he entered his private office. He picked it up. Tim Rourke's voice greeted him.

"Hello, Tim," Shayne said. "What do you have?"

"Not much, Mike. On Ullman you can write your own book. He was in and out of jail on fraud charges, smuggling beefs, and even some narcotics pick-ups all his life. If it was illegal and didn't need muscle Ullman was in it. Lately he'd been clean, just running that

religious junk, except for one thing."

"What was that?"

"He'd been spending money, good sized money. Rumor had it he was mixed up with some big-time operator, but no names."

Shayne sat down behind his desk and cradled the telephone receiver as he lighted a cigarette. "Go on, Tim."

"The Millers come out clean. All I could find on Mildred Miller was that she was once a beauty contest winner. Miller is her second husband. Miller himself never got in the papers except for a small back-page bit on that hit-and-run. He couldn't tell the police anything."

"Anything on Mildred's first husband?" Shayne asked.

"Just a name, Allen. Ken Allen, an out-of-stater. It cost me ten bucks to get a look at the certificate on Sunday."

"I'll make it good," Shayne said drily. "What about *La Casablanca, thirty-eight?*"

"That was easy," Rourke reported from the other end of the line. "It's a ship—a small coaster. Came in today at Pier thirty-eight."

Shayne sat up straight. "Came in? When, Tim?"

"About an hour ago."

"On Sunday?"

"Unusual, but not unheard of. They lay over and start work tomorrow," Shayne's reporter friend explained.

"Thanks, Tim!" Shayne snapped.

"Whoa, Mike! Cut me in. I'm a reporter, remember?"

"Later, Tim. Get over to Lucy's and wait for my call," Shayne said hurriedly, and hung up.

The redhead went out of his empty office on the dead run. He did not wait for the slow Sunday elevator but ran down the stairs and out into the street. In his car he roared away from the curb and turned toward Biscayne Bay and Pier 38.

The *La Casablanca* was tied up and apparently deserted in the sun. Shayne went up the gangplank fast and silent. He stood on the small deck and looked fore and aft. He saw the man lying on the deck in front of an open cabin door.

Shayne recognized the man on the deck: Evan Kingsley's butler!

He bent over the fallen man. The butler was not dead. He had been knocked out, and his pistol was still in his hand. As Tim Rourke had said, Kingsley's butler was more than a butler. Shayne took the precaution of removing the pistol and dropping it overboard.

Then he searched the butler who was still out. He found nothing. He stood to go into the cabin through the open door.

"Put your hands up! And be quick about it."

The man stood just inside the cabin. A small man dressed in the

uniform of a ship's officer. He held a pistol aimed at Shayne's heart.

VII

MIKE SHAYNE put his hands up. The ship's officer searched him gingerly. The man was obviously not an expert. But he found the automatic Shayne had taken the precaution of bringing from his office this time.

"Step to the wall," the ship's officer said.

Shayne stepped to the wall, his hands still up. His grey eyes were hooded as he feigned a certain fear while he watched for his chance. This man was an amateur and nervous.

"Now what do you want here?" the officer said.

"What have you got to give me?" Shayne said.

"I—" the officer began.

Shayne broke in. "Or did you give it to him?"

Shayne nodded toward the fallen butler. The officer looked uneasily at the unconscious man.

"You're in trouble," Shayne said. "He's got friends, very nasty friends. Did you knock him out?"

"No! She did!"

"She?" Shayne said. "That would be the Miller woman?"

The officer paled, stepped toward Shayne. It was his mistake. As the man stepped forward the redhead moved. He darted inside the line of fire and before the officer could step frantically back to bring his gun to bear, Shayne swung a single short punch to his jaw. The officer went down like an axed steer.

Shayne retrieved the man's fallen pistol, and took up his own automatic. Then he lighted a cigarette and waited for the officer to revive. Out on the deck the butler was groaning now. But whatever had hit the butler had done a good job, for he made no attempt to get up. The ships officer woke up.

"All right," Shayne said. "Now you tell me."

The man sat sullen and silent.

"Then I'll tell you," Shayne said. "It was something, a package, right? You brought it in. You delivered it to Kingsley's men. Only something went wrong. The Miller woman slugged our friend out there and took the package."

The officer said nothing. Shayne reached down, picked him up, and deposited him in a chair. The detective's face was grim.

"Listen, and listen good," Shayne said hard. "You brought something in. I'm going to call the cops. Now right this minute you face a smuggling rap, maybe narcotics, but that's all. The police will find out what you've been up to, you can count on that. But that's all you face. If you don't talk, and I don't call the police, you face a lot worse, you understand?

"They'll be after you to shut you up if nothing else, and you know

it. From the look of it here, something's gone wrong, and that puts you right on the spot. If you want to live you better talk and let the police protect you."

The man looked up. His face was paler than death. He began to talk. "A package, I was to deliver it and get paid. That was all," he said.

"To Kingsley's men?"

"I don't know any Kingsley. I was to deliver it to the Miller woman and be paid. I had her description and a code word."

Shayne watched the man. "You were to deliver it to the woman?"

"Yes, she was to come alone. But that man came with her. I did not like it, but they had guns. I gave her the package and she paid me. They left. Outside the door I heard the noise. I went to the door and the man was lying there. The woman was running off the ship. There was another man, a big man. He was on the dock. The woman ran away from him and got into a taxi. The big man went after the taxi in a car. That is all I know."

Shayne tugged on his earlobe. The big man had to be Mario Greco. A double-cross? It had all the smell of it. But who had double-crossed who, and why? From the start the abduction of the boy had looked like pressure on Mildred Miller, probably from Kingsley. But now the Miller woman had knocked out one of Kingsley's men,

and run from Greco? Was she double-crossing Kingsley, or were Greco and the butler trying to double-cross Kingsley?

"Let me get it straight," Shayne said. "You had a package to deliver to Mildred Miller. You had her description and a code word. She showed up with our friend out there. You went through with the deal, and got paid. How much?"

The man shrugged sullenly. One grand. It is not enough to die for."

"I agree," Shayne said drily. "After you handed over the package, they left. But outside the man was slugged and the Miller woman ran off the ship. Then you saw a big man chasing her, but she got into a cab and escaped. Then the big man drove off after her."

The man nodded. "They said only the woman. I should not have made the transfer, but—"

"But you were paid," Shayne said sarcastically. "Just who are

they, the ones who set-up the deal?"

"Who knows?" the officer said. "A man in Cuba, I don't know him. Here, I was to see only the woman."

"And you don't know what was in the package?"

"No."

"How big a package?"

"Small, no bigger than my hand. But I think valuable. It was light, and they paid me one grand for it."

"Heroin?"

"Who knows? I don't ask questions."

"Maybe you should have," Shayne said.

He stepped to the ship's officer and dropped him again with a single deft blow on the chin that snapped the man's head back. Then he dragged the groaning butler into the cabin and laid him beside the unconscious officer. From the look of it, the butler probably had a fractured skull and needed help.

Shayne searched the cabin for something to bind the men with. He did not want to leave the cabin. The ship was apparently all but deserted on Sunday, but he had no intention of taking chances. He finally found two long lamp cords that would hold the officer long enough. The butler was going nowhere. The door key was in the lock on the inside. Shayne took the key and locked the door on the outside as he left.

He hurried off the deserted ship and walked to a nearby tavern. There he called the police and told them to pick up the two men on the ship. That done he walked back to his car. He still did not know who was double-crossing whom, and just how the kidnapped boy fitted in.

There was only one place to find out.

He drove fast through the late afternoon sun toward the house of Evan Kingsley.

VIII

NO ONE CAME out to meet Mike Shayne as he drove up to Kingsley's house. The gardener was not in sight. The chauffeur was no longer lounging beside the deserted pool. The entire house was quiet and still.

Shayne moved cautiously through the grounds, looking for Kingsley's men. There was no one. The garage was empty, the three cars that had been there were gone. Shayne drew his automatic and entered the house.

In the warm afternoon sunlight the house was dim and shaded. The downstairs entrance hall was long and wide, ending in a large flight of curved stairs up to the second floor. To the left of the entrance hall the enormous living room stood empty. Shayne walked on down the hall.

He found the first body outside

a small door in the left wall beneath the stairs.

It was the chauffeur. He had been shot once between the eyes and once in the left shoulder. He lay on his side, with one arm flung out. In a corner Shayne saw a pistol. The detective picked it up by the barrel and sniffed it. The gun had been fired. Shayne spun the cylinder—fired only once!

Shayne turned and looked at the dead man again. He lay just in front of the door. As if he had been shot from inside the room. Shayne opened the small door, and stepped into a large office. Maps and photographs of trucks covered the walls. It looked like a dispatcher's office. Kingsley apparently ran his business from his house. But it was not the maps that made Shayne stare.

The room had been ransacked. The safe in the wall stood open and empty. Drawers had been pulled out of the desk, the file cabinets, and two chest of drawers, and the contents strewn across the room. It did not look like a search, but a gathering, a grab and run. Someone had searched, grabbed and run. Like a retreating army taking all that was valuable as fast as they could.

He found the second body behind the desk.

Evan Kingsley.

The fat little man had been shot once in the head. From the look of the wound it, too, had been a .38. The same as the shot that had killed Ullman. Kingsley lay on his back, his desk chair still under him, his automatic in his hand. The automatic had not been fired.

Shayne stood looking down at Kingsley. Something was wrong, illogical. Not exactly wrong perhaps, but not right, not logical. The redhead stared down at the body, and tried to remember how he had seen the body of Ullman.

The shot missed Shayne by a hair.

The detective dove for cover behind the edge of the desk. His automatic was out. There was a second shot and a shadow crossed the light outside the open french doors that led from the office out to the pool.

Shayne fired. Three quick answering shots ripped into the desk where Shayne crouched. He ran for the french doors and fell into the cover of the wall near where the doors stood open. Through the open doors he saw the big man crouched behind the wall that edged the open pool area.

"Greco!" he called out warningly. "You can't get away with it! Throw down your gun! This is Mike Shayne!"

Greco remained crouched for a long minute. Then the big gunman rose to his full height and began to run away from the house. Shayne leaped out in pursuit. Greco raced across the open lawn and into the heavy growth of bushes and trees

that bordered Kingsley's estate. Shayne reached the bushes and plunged in, slowing, moving more carefully.

He had almost reached the road when he heard the car motor start. By the time he came out onto the road, the long black car was racing away into the evening sun. Shayne turned and ran back to the house, telling himself that if he could reach Gentry immediately the Chief could set up roadblocks and capture Mario Greco.

Shayne ran into the office-study where the body of Evan Kingsley still lay on the floor. He reached for the telephone—and stopped with his hand on the receiver. How could Greco have double-crossed Kingsley and still have killed him?

Shayne looked down at the dead man. One shot in the head, and his own gun still in his hand. How could Greco have gotten close enough, or had time to draw his gun?

Shayne stood very still, his bushy red eyebrows knitted in thought. Greco had shot at him when he had seen him in the office of the dead Evan Kingsley. But when Shayne had called out, Greco had run away.

Shayne looked at the ransacked office. Like the final grab of men who are running—Kingsley's gang grabbing what they could before they escaped. With their boss dead, the gang had fled. All except Greco and the chauffeur. The chauffeur had tried to come into the office to help Kingsley, had fired once, and had been killed. It had to figure that way.

And Mildred Miller was still missing—with the package from the *La Casablanca.*

Shayne turned back to the telephone. He dialed quickly. Lucy answered at once as if she had been sitting beside the telephone.

"Michael? Where are you? Chief Gentry is furious! He says he'll charge you with leaving the scene of a crime for leaving those two men on that ship."

"Never mind that now, Angel," Shayne snapped. "Is Tim there?"

"Yes, Michael."

"Put him on. Quickly, Angel."

Rourke's voice came on the line. "What's up, Mike?"

"Tim, you said George Miller was Mildred's second husband. Right?"

"Right," Rourke said from the other end of the line.

"How long, Tim? How long have Miller and Mildred been married?"

"What? Well, wait a minute while I check my notes." There was silence and a rustling of papers on the far end of the line as Shayne waited impatiently. Then the voice of the lean reporter returned. "Three years, Mike—a little more."

"Thanks, Tim," Shayne said.

"Mike, Chief Gentry's got an APB out on Mildred Miller. That

officer from the *La Casablanca* told the whole story. Gentry figures you cost him at least two hours in getting that package," the lean reporter's voice said.

"Tell Will to get up to Miller's apartment, Mildred'll be there sooner or later. I'm coming over myself. Tell Will to be careful, and you stay downstairs with Lucy until I show up. You got that, Tim?"

"I've got it, Mike. You're coming here?"

"I'm practically there now," Shayne said grimly.

The red head hung up and strode out of the office of the dead Evan Kingsley. He stepped over the body of the chauffer and went out of the house to his car. Moments later he was driving hard down the highway back into Miami.

IX

MIKE SHAYNE strode into the apartment of George Miller. The door had been open, and police cars were all over the street outside. Lucy Hamilton and Tim Rourke turned as Shayne came in.

"Oh, Michael, they've killed Mildred!" Lucy cried.

"We were all too late, Mike," Rourke said.

Chief Gentry chewed furiously on the stump of his black cigar. George Miller sat in an armchair, his head held in his one good hand. Will Gentry looked at

Shayne and the Chief was really angry this time. The blonde woman from the pool lay on the floor.

"She's dead, and the package is gone, Mike. It's your fault. If you'd stayed at that ship until we got there we might have arrived in time. I'm going to get your license this time, Mike. I mean it!"

Shayne waved his big hand impatiently. "How did it happen, Will?"

Gentry scowled. "Rourke called me as you told him to do. We got over here fast. Just as we were coming up the stairs we heard the shots. He got her from the fire escape. It's the only way."

"Why?" Shayne said. "Why not from in the room?"

Gentry swore. "Damn it, Mike. Miller was in the room with her. He says she came home no more than a few minutes before we did. She was scared to death. She said they were after her. We know she was the pick-up for that shipment

of whatever it was. Obviously she tried a double-cross on Kingsley and he got her."

"Not Kingsley," Shayne said bluntly, and he told Gentry what he had found at Kingsley's house. When he got to the part about Greco, Gentry began to swear again. The Chief looked at the dead woman.

"There it is! Greco! He tried a double-cross on Kingsley, probably killed Kingsley, and came for the Miller woman."

"Why did Greco beat it when he saw it was me in Kingsley's office?" Shayne said.

"He wasn't after you." Gentry said. "He was after Mildred and that package."

Shayne spoke softly. But she didn't have the package."

There was a long silence in the room. Gentry blinked, looked at Shayne.

"Damn it, Mike, it has to be Greco or one of Kingsley's other men," he said harshly. "There isn't anyone else!"

"Isn't there?" Shayne said, quietly.

Lucy Hamilton cried out, stared at George Miller who had suddenly stood up from his seat.

"Mr. Miller!" Lucy cried. "George!"

George Miller stared at Shayne. "You're insane, I—"

Everyone in the room looked at George Miller. The tall man seemed to sway momentarily. Chief Gentry threw up his hands in disgust.

"What did he kill her with, Mike, black magic? He doesn't have a gun on him. There isn't a gun in the room. He didn't have time to stash it away, and we searched outside under the windows to make sure he didn't throw it out. There just isn't a gun in the place. We searched it high and low."

"Isn't there, Will?" Shayne said. "Let's see."

Shayne moved. Before anyone knew what he was doing he strode to George Miller and grabbed the tall man's broken arm. Miller cursed savagely and swung with his good hand. Mike Shayne ducked and lost his grip on the broken arm.

Miller dashed for the door. Two policemen grabbed him by the shoulders and his good arm before he was a third of the way across the room.

Shayne jumped after Miller, his heavy automatic in his hand. He brought the heavy gun down hard on the tall art dealer's broken arm. The cast shattered into a thousand pieces.

The snub-nosed police special .38 fell to the floor.

Where he was held in the hard grip of the police, George Miller began to swear a stream of curses.

Will Gentry bent and picked up the ugly snub-nosed pistol. The Chief of Police looked at Shayne.

"Inside the cast, I'll be damned," Gentry said.

Shayne nodded. "I should have noticed that the cast was too big. I expect you'll find powder burns on the cast."

Shayne turned to the still-swearing George Miller. "Where's the boy, Miller?"

"Go to hell!" Miller cried.

"I expect he's close by somewhere, probably in another apartment on this floor Miller rented under a phony name. Let's have a look."

It was the third apartment down the hall. There was no answer when Gentry's men knocked. The superintendent came with a key, and they opened the door.

The small boy looked up at them from the middle of the floor. He smiled and went on playing with the small packages of white powder he had strewn all over the room from an opened brown paper package. The little boy was enjoying the heroin, throwing the packages up into the air and laughing.

IN LUCY HAMILTON'S apartment, Chief Gentry had lighted his cigar and sat now with a glass of cognac in his hand. Rourke and Lucy were looking admiringly at Shayne.

"She was going to double-cross him and hand the stuff over to Evan Kingsley," Gentry explained. "He's talking, and we'll pick up Greco for corroboration sooner or later. He's been bringing in the heroin for years, with Mildred making the pick-ups. Ullman was part of the set-up Miller used.

"Only Kingsley tried to muscle-in, and got to Mildred. She wasn't any better than she had to be. Kingsley made her a good deal, I suppose, and she agreed to double-cross Miller. Kingsley even tried to kill Miller with that hit-and run, the way it looks. Greco will tell us more when we get him.

"They had to have Mildred, she knew the code word for the pick-up. She knew where and when it was to be made. So Kingsley got to her and she threw in with him."

Shayne nodded. "So Miller decided to kidnap the boy to pressure her into changing sides again, and when I happened along by chance, he decided to use me to take the message to her. It worked like a charm. Little Mildred decided to re-change sides and give the stuff to Miller after all to get her boy back.

"The boy is her kid, not Miller's. That was something I didn't know until I guessed, and asked Tim about how long Miller and Mildred had been married. Three years, and the boy is five."

"But, Michael," Lucy burst out, "why knock me out and take the boy? All he had to do was come down and pick him up!"

Shayne shook his head. "No, Angel. If you or anyone else knew Miller had the boy, the threat

wouldn't work. He could not have convinced Mildred that he really might hurt her boy if she knew other people knew he had him. He had to convince her that he could even kill the boy and be unsuspected. For that he had to fake a kidnap, and no one suspected him."

"How did you suspect him, Mike?" Rourke said.

"I didn't at first. I would have, but that kidnapping just didn't seem right. I mean his own son," Shayne said. "It was only when I took a good long look at how Ullman and Kingsley were shot. Then it hit me."

"What about how they were shot?" Gentry said sharply.

"They were both professional criminals, Will," Shayne said. "They were both cautious and accustomed to danger and killing. Both of them had a gun right at hand—but neither of them had fired a shot."

Gentry swore. "Damn it, Mike, they were surprised! Especially Ullman, he was working for Miller. They were just caught by surprise."

Shayne nodded. "Yes, Will, but how? They were both at their desks, armed, in their own territory. They both knew they were in a dangerous game. How could anyone just walk in with a gun in his hand? No one could. And the way they both had guns at hand, no killer would have had time to draw a gun and shoot them without getting shot at at least once.

"No, I realized that the only way anyone could have killed them both with one shot was to be standing right in front of them with the gun already on them—but out of sight. That was when I knew that Miller had a gun inside that cast on his arm. They never saw the gun until he shot them."

"One thing, Mike," Rourke said. "Why did he kill Ullman?"

"Because I had talked to Ullman," Shayne said. "He planned to kill Ullman the instant he told me to visit Ullman. He's a careful man. I don't expect Ullman liked the way things were working out, either. Violence wasn't his line."

There was another silence. This time it was Lucy Hamilton who spoke first. "Poor Petey," she said. "He's lost them both now."

"Maybe it's better to be an orphan than have parents like those two, Angel," Sahyne said. "She couldn't even stay loyal to her husband, she was that greedy for money. And Miller would have killed the boy if it got him what he wanted. Maybe the kid's lucky."

After that they just sat and drank the good cognac until Will Gentry got up to go. Rourke and Gentry left. Shayne and Lucy sat on in the dark thinking about a package of heroin that had ended up a little boy's plaything. Heroin that had cost four lives, and would cost more.

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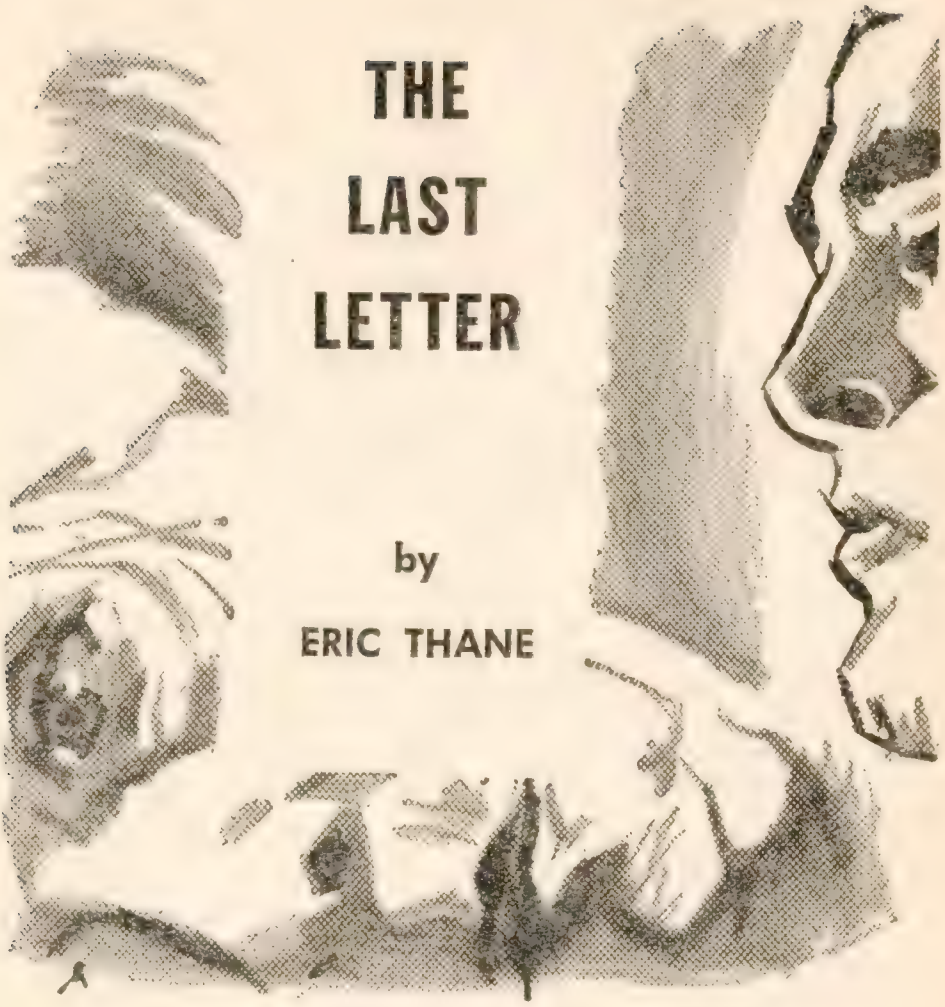


THE LAST LETTER

by

ERIC THANE

He had a rendezvous with Death . . . and life as well.

THE ELDERLY MAN'S eyes were bright and his features, in profile, had almost the look of youth. You hardly noticed the faint blur across the eyeballs, and the shadow along the clean-shaven jaw. When Norman Grey—the name he gave me—stood up, he moved as energetically as a man of forty and spoke with the clipped emphasis of a military drill instructor.

When he'd first admitted me into his apartment and I had been seated I told him it was his adver-

tisement in the paper that brought me to him. I even read it to him though I was sure he knew every word by heart: "Somewhat elderly man, in excellent physical and mental health, scheduled to die shortly. Open to any proposition carrying very large remuneration. Write Box Twenty-one, this paper, within three days. Time is important."

He was now pacing the room of the small apartment, a slight man in knife-creased trousers and white shirt open at the throat. At intervals he ran his fingers through his gray hair—a great deal of hair for a man his age.

"So you're an amateur writer, eh?" he said easily to me. "I've known many nonprofessionals in the creative field and they have a hard row to sow. I question now—what do you actually do to make a living?"

"As a matter of fact, Mr. Grey," I told him. "I'm a reporter on the newspaper. That's how I was able to run you down. But I'm not here as a reporter. I'm curious about you and the many letters you've received."

"I was led to believe that a newspaper box was inviolate," he said, with a slight trace of asperity in his voice.

"It is. I just happened to have the proper contacts. Look, Mr. Grey, it won't hurt you to talk to me. This might be the turning point in my efforts to be a writer. And naturally the story, if I get one, will not be published until—"

"Until I'm dead?" He threw out the question without emotion.

"Until you're dead," I said, nodding.

He looked at me and waited.

"Mr. Grey," I went on, "you mentioned three days in your ad. You picked up your mail this morning, the last day. A lot of people must have read that ad, including the police. But you don't have to worry about the police. Nobody knows where you can be found, except me."

"You trailed me to my home?" he asked.

"Right. I waited until somebody asked for Box Twenty-one. I figured, by the nature of the ad, you'd make only one pick-up—the day following the last insertion."

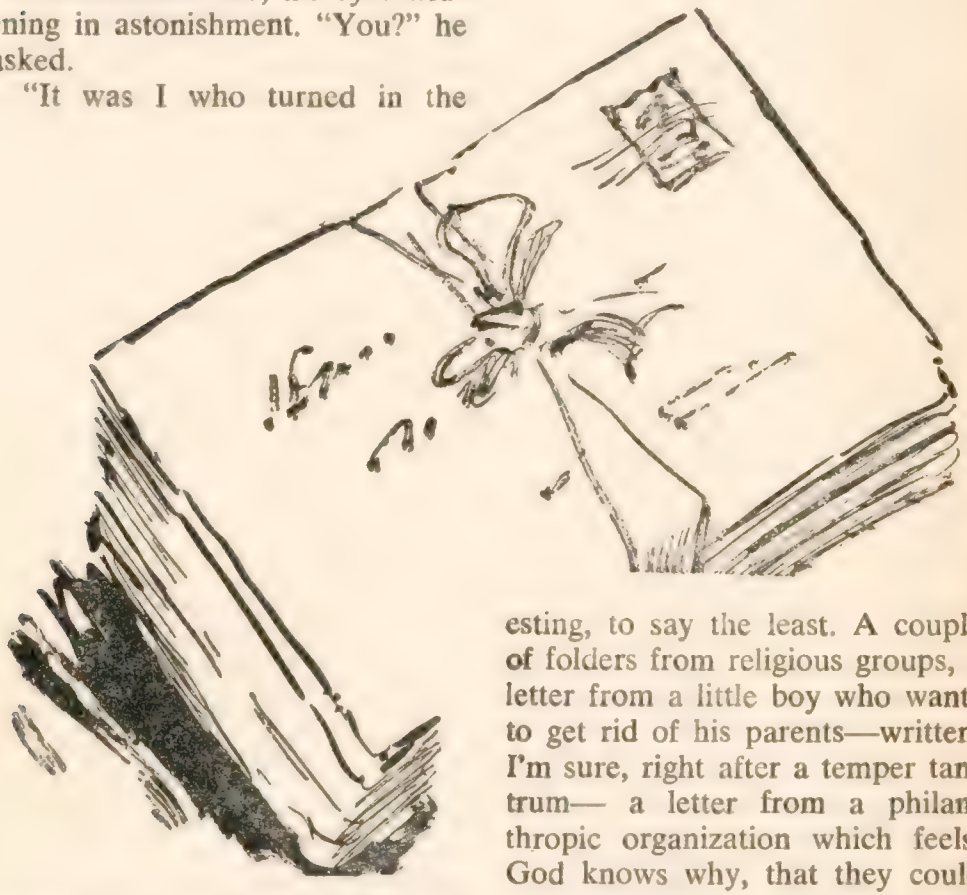
"There were a number of individuals in the classified ad office who seemed to have a furtive air, as if they did not want me to suspect I was under observation," Grey said. "Plainclothesmen, probably—and reporters from the opposition paper. When I first went in I was placed in a dilemma. I was tempted to abandon the whole project and seek some other way of making money, since publicity or the law would destroy what I had set out to do. But just then the fire alarm rang and in the confusion—"

"You barely whispered 'Box Twenty-one' to the girl there, who

had a newspaper spread out in front of her. Under the newspaper she pushed the package of mail toward you. On the surface, you received nothing. The alarm kept everybody else occupied. But I knew what to expect, and I was waiting."

He looked at me, his eyes widening in astonishment. "You?" he asked.

"It was I who turned in the



alarm. Oh, nobody was aware of that. I watched you leave. You were not followed by anyone else. So the set-up is perfect—you've got your mail, and you can talk to me without interference. What I'm interested in, right now—" I paused to light a cigarette, my fingers none too steady. "You received about a dozen letters," I said, watching him intently. "What do they say?"

Grey smiled wryly. "I'd just finished skimming through them when you arrived. They are interesting, to say the least. A couple of folders from religious groups, a letter from a little boy who wants to get rid of his parents—written, I'm sure, right after a temper tantrum— a letter from a philanthropic organization which feels, God knows why, that they could use me and a letter from a lady offering to marry me! The other correspondents did not miss the implications which I wanted the ad to convey."

"Big money, sudden money such as you're looking for," I said, "is in the nature of a windfall. It

can seldom be acquired legally overnight."

Grey nodded, meeting my gaze unflinchingly. "You don't have to remind me of that," he said.

I stubbed out my cigarette, wiped my sweating palms. I was probably more tense than he.

"Look at me, young man," he said. "I'm seventy-six years old, healthy as they come. My mind is as bright as it was when I was forty. But in a few days or weeks a pain will start in my head, and it will grow worse, and inside of a month I will be dead. Or so my physician, in whom I have the greatest faith, tells me."

He paused for an instant, then went on: "I live on a small pension, enough to get by because my wants are few. I have nobody left on earth. My wife died years ago, and my two sons have gone their own way. I do not even know where they are. I've never had much money. In my last few days, I wish a great deal of money. You wonder why?"

Before I could reply he resumed his pacing. "I don't know why I'm telling you all this. Perhaps it's because for many years I was a frustrated writer. I never sold a thing and I finally gave it up. To keep myself occupied during my years of retirement, I've done volunteer work in the childrens' hospital here in the city."

A different note came into his brusque voice, a kind of sentimental undertone. "I'm not an emotional individual, young man, but as I grow older I've come more and more to believe that youth should be given a chance. These kids . . . My life is lived out, and I have never, in my later years, grabbed at life frenziedly like so many oldsters. If it weren't for the kids, I'd make no effort to do what I wish to do. But it seems to me that every kid should have a normal crack at life. He might make it, and he might not. But he should have the chance. I know a dozen kids who will never have the chance—unless they're given the most expensive kind of medical treatment by world-famous specialists. Money is necessary—an anonymous contribution specifying what is to be done."

I stubbed my half-smoked cigarette out. Grey made me curiously nervous, the way he paced, and avoided looking squarely at me.

I dragged out another smoke and offered him the pack, which he waved away. "You'll appreciate that I must work fast," he went on. "The pain may start an hour from now, or within a week. When it starts, I won't have long, even if I do not become totally incapacitated."

I glanced at the mail rack which stood on the coffee table in the center of the room. "I see you've put three of the letters to one side," I said. "They're the promising ones, I take it?"

Norman Grey nodded, stopped his pacing, and crossed to the coffee table. "You're interested in them of course. I rather thought you would be. Suppose I read them to you."

He opened one of the three letters. "This one is typewritten on plain, but expensive paper," he said. "There's something about it that attracts me. I'm somewhat psychic, I think, and I'm convinced that it holds promise. This is what the writer says, 'Your advertisement indicates that you would be interested in a straightforward business proposition. I am prepared to pay several thousand dollars. Please call this number on the evening of June Twenty-first, between eight and nine o'clock. Ask for Tommy. I will take the call from a pay phone in a bar. If there should be a mix-up and somene else answers, please repeat the call in a few minutes.' "

"You picked that one by instinct?" I asked.

"You may call it that, if you wish. There's something about those few words . . . I feel that the writer is a middle-aged, successful business man, harassed by events beyond his control and seeing as his only alternative the death of someone—a business partner, perhaps." He stared for a few moments at the letter. "Not his wife. I feel certain of that."

It was hard for me to believe that his self-proclaimed psychic gifts could have enabled him to deduce so much about the writer from just a few hastily scribbled lines. "What about this letter on lined paper in a cheap envelope, handwritten, with a hundred-dollar bill attached?" I asked.

"A woman, although the contact may be through a man," Grey replied. "In spite of the cheap stationery, meant to cloak her identity, a woman with a great deal of money, seeking to get rid of—whom? A lover—a husband—a blackmailer? I don't know. Listen to this:

'I am prepared to offer you ten thousand dollars for an assignment which involves an actual working time of only a few minutes. The inclosed money is proof of my earnest intentions. Please meet me in Hill Park near the Confederate memorial at eight p.m. on June the Twenty-second. Wear carpet slippers. You will be approached by an individual who will be wearing a white, badly-stained trench coat. A deal will then be made'."

Grey slowly folded the letter and tossed the bill to the center of the coffee table. "That will take care of one operation." he said. "I think this woman is clever. She asks me to wear carpet slippers. She omits a flower in the buttonhole, that very trite identification symbol. And she assumes I will have intelligence enough to appreciate intelligence in others."

I stabbed out my smoke, staring

at the third letter, typewritten on a single sheet of typing paper. My lips were dry.

"The third letter," said Grey reflectively, "is much longer than the others. The two letters you've seen were composed by individuals of mature years, thinking coldly yet desperately. This last letter gives evidence of pure desperation. A young man—As I've said, I think a great deal of young people and possibly that's why I read this one with considerable sympathy."

He brooded a moment, then went on: "It's fairly long—a justification for what is sought. I won't read it, but briefing it down, it concerns a young man, ambitious, with a scholarship for foreign travel and research offered him, saddled by a harridan who trapped him into marriage by the well-known false pregnancy route. A conscientious young man, who for five years has tried to make a success of a bad bargain. The wife is a shrew, self-indulgent, hateful in every way. He sees nothing ahead for him. She laughs at the great opportunity which has come to him. She will not divorce him, and the laws of this state are such that it is difficult for him to divorce her. His only hope lies in her death."

"How about the fee?" I asked.

"He has gotten together five thousand dollars, just how I don't know. That extra five thousand would help me a great deal. And in accepting this last assignment, I would also be helping a deserving young person."

Norman Grey looked at me. "He could, of course, simply disappear," he said. "But that would not be practical for a young man of great ambition in his position."

He smiled then for the first time. "I talk like the advice columnists in the newspaper," he said. "The letter informs me that the wife spends her afternoon in front of the TV and, like most housewives, she leaves her back door unlocked. She has few friends. Hence she would be likely to be alone in the afternoon."

The gaze he turned on me was piercing. "I would visualize her as a young, stout woman, blonde, sloppy, and with most of a one-time prettiness gone. If you were putting her into a story would you describe her in that way?"

I nodded, my mouth very dry. "Her favorite TV serial comes on at three o'clock," I said. "She would have a drink beside her. In fact, she would have several by then and would be a little drunk."

"Well . . ." Grey said abruptly. "This has been a most enlightening conversation. But now I'm afraid you must excuse me. It's close to noon, and I have so little time left."

"You've made your decision?" I asked.

"Definitely. There remains now only the matter of contact—of money." For a long moment his eyes held mine.

"Would you mind if I made a note or two for a possible story before I go?" I asked.

"Naturally not."

He didn't look at me, but walked to the window and stood staring out while I pulled an envelope from the inside pocket of my coat and scribbled an address on it. The envelope was thick with money.

I tossed it on the coffee table and moved to the door. Grey murmured, "You are going back to work now, I presume. You will undoubtedly be in full view of many of your colleagues until quitting time this afternoon. I advise you to take a companion with you when you return home."

He turned again to stare out the window. "Good luck,young man," he said. "The world is ahead of you. May you lick it as some of those kids down in the hospital will get a chance to lick it!"

I went into the street, sweating.

Some of Next Month's Headliners

THE GOOD CITIZEN by BRETT HALLIDAY

The New Mike Shayne Novelet

THE CASE OF THE GORGEOUS GAMS by JOHN D. MacDONALD

A Hard-Hitting Suspense Novelet

COUNTER POINT by GINA DESSART

A DECENT LIE by JAMES McKIMMEY

LET THE CREDIT GO by JAMES HOLDING

PREMONITION OF EVIL by JAMES O'CONNOR SARGENT

WERE YOU SEARCHED?

a LUCIUS LEFFING story

by JOSEPH PAYNE BRENNAN

It isn't always necessary to be a thief . . . to make a diamond vanish.

ONE APRIL afternoon while out taking a walk, I acted on a sudden impulse and made my way to seven Autumn Street, the home of my investigator friend, Lucius Leffing.

"You arrived at a propitious moment," he said, waving me to a chair in his Victorian living room. "I am trying to make a decision."

"About what?"

"About a case concerning the disappearance of a diamond at a select jewelry establishment in Hartford."

"Bit out of your line, isn't it?"

Leffing nodded. "It is. But the fee looks generous. And as you are aware, my resources have grown scanty."

"Take the case, by all means then. But it seems rather odd."

"Why do you say so?"

"Well," I replied, "aren't all jewelry stores routinely insured anyway?"

"Undoubtedly," Leffing said, "but this stone—a perfect one—exceeds a valuation of twenty thousand dollars. A claim could run up the insurance rates. However there are other factors involved. The diamond—known as the Mantzen diamond—has been in the same family for generations and is a cherished heirloom. The present owner, Gerald Mantzen, is one of the establishment's best customers. Beyond that, two old-time employees are under suspicion of theft. The management would also like the matter cleared up without publicity."

I stood up. "I'll walk home and get my car at once," I told him.

An appreciative smile touched Leffing's angular face. "Your zeal is commendable, but the store

would be closed by the time we arrived. However, I would be grateful if you could appear at eight-thirty tomorrow morning."

We arrived in Hartford shortly after nine o'clock the next morning and before ten found ourselves seated in the manager's office of one of the most exclusive jewelry establishments in New England.

The manager, Mr. Lionel Bainbridge, was an amiable middle-aged gentleman whose sleek exterior and aura of ultimate discretion reminded me of an expert undertaker's assistant. But now a frown of distress shadowed his smooth features.

"The facts, so far as I can ascertain them," he explained, "are as follows. Our client, Mr. Gerald Mantzen, had left the family diamond to be reset into a ring. It had formerly adorned a brooch. It had been removed from the brooch and for a very brief time lay on a tray. Then Mr. Steiger, an old and trusted employee, picked it up from the tray with a pair of tweezers in order to transfer it into a small case where it would remain until our man was ready to fit it into the ring.

"The case, I need hardly add, would be kept in our safe. At the very moment Mr. Steiger lifted the diamond from the tray, another employee, a Mr. Harlend, brushed past him and accidentally struck his arm.

"Now these tweezers have a fairly high tension. As Mr. Steiger's arm was struck, a natural reflex action made his forefinger and thumb suddenly tighten their grip. This sudden force caused the diamond to snap out of the tweezers—probably with considerable momentum."

Mr. Bainbridge paused, pulled a neat white handkerchief from his jacket pocket and carefully wiped the perspiration from his forehead. "It is the type of accident which might happen once in a hundred years. It is our misfortune that it happened here to the property of one of our best customers."

"A search was made immediately?" Leffing asked.

Mr. Bainbridge nodded. "Mr. Steiger quickly searched the nearby floor area. Not locating the stone, he came into my office and informed me of the loss. I hurried out at once. Mr. Steiger, Mr. Harlend and myself undertook an inch by inch inspection of the entire floor, wall to wall, door to door.

"When this proved futile, I suggested that both Mr. Steiger and Mr. Harlend submit to a personal search. They agreed—with some reluctance. Mr. Cassman—my assistant—and myself searched their clothes from the skin out. Later we went over all the counters, the shelves, the desks—every possible place we could think of."

"Were any windows or doors open?" Leffing asked.

Mr. Bainbridge shook his head.

"No, it was a rather cool day. We had heat on."

He sighed. "Steiger and Harlend were alone in the customer section when the accident took place. No one else saw it happen. We—unhappily—do not rule out the possibility that the two of them hid the diamond and made up the accident story. We hate to think so. They are both veteran employees. You will of course wish to interview them?"

"Possibly," Leffing replied. "But first I would like to see the store area where the loss actually occurred."

Mr. Bainbridge led us from his office to the counter where Mr. Steiger had been standing when the diamond flew out of his tweezers.

After requesting the loan of a magnifying glass, Leffing got down on his hands and knees and crawled slowly along the floor.

Mr. Bainbridge watched with obvious impatience. "Inlaid oak," he assured Leffing, "tight as a drum. I can guarantee there are no crevices."

Leffing answered without looking up. "I am not searching for crevices, Mr. Bainbridge."

He continued along the floor, pausing finally just outside the manager's office.

At length he arose. "The search of your employees' clothing was quite thorough, Mr. Bainbridge? Trouser cuffs and so forth?"

"Absolutely. Everything was turned inside out."

"I see," Leffing answered absently. He stood staring at the floor as if he were in a quandary. Suddenly he looked up. "One more question. Were you searched, Mr. Bainbridge?"

A flush traveled up Mr. Bainbridge's neck. His smooth pink cheeks turned a darker hue. "Really, sir, isn't your question somewhat out of order? I was not present when the accident occurred."

"You were in your office behind a closed door?"

"Exactly!"

"But you hurried out within minutes?"

"Of course!"

Leffing replaced the magnifying glass on an adjacent counter. "Mr. Bainbridge, if you will kindly remove your shoes, I believe we may recover the Mantzen diamond."

Mr. Bainbridge's mouth fell open. "I—I beg your pardon. What did you say?"

"If you will take off your shoes, Mr. Bainbridge," repeated Leffing patiently, "I believe we may find the lost stone."

Crimson-faced, Mr. Bainbridge sought out a chair, took off his shoes and handed them to my friend.

Leffing peered at the bottom of one shoe, frowned and set it down. As he bent over the other, however, I saw his face light up. He held out the inverted shoe to Mr. Bainbridge.

"There is the Mantzen diamond!" he said.

Mr. Bainbridge gasped. "I don't see—Where?"

"Embedded in the heel," Leffing told him. "Look closely."

I joined Mr. Bainbridge and our astonishment was mutual. The Mantzen diamond was firmly lodged in a circular hole which was part of the trade-mark design on Mr. Bainbridge's heel.

The manager stared up at my friend as if he were a magician. "But how did it happen and how did you know? It seems totally incredible."

Leffing shrugged. "It was not difficult. With the aid of your good magnifying glass I observed several fresh scratches on the floor only a few feet in front of your office. I found none anywhere else. When I noticed in addition that you were wearing new shoes, the solution was obvious. The Mantzen diamond landed on the floor outside your office where the lighting is more subdued than in the customer section. In his haste and agitation Mr. Steiger did not see the stone. Apparently he stepped right over it.

"As you hurried from the office, you trod on it with one of your new heels. The diamond, as luck would have it, lodged in one of the small circular holes which are part of the design for that particular brand of rubber heel. Momentarily a corner of the stone stuck out and scratched the floor. Your weight of course quickly forced it deeper into the heel. That is why no scratches were visible anywhere else."

As we drove back toward New Haven after lunch, Leffing turned toward me. "I have a few minor tasks scheduled for the afternoon, Brennan, but I trust you will come round tonight. We must take a brandy or two, as is our custom when a case has been successfully concluded!"

"I don't feel I've contributed anything which entitles me to help deplete your select stock!" I said.

Leffing smiled genially. "Tut! Tut! Brennan! You contribute more than you know. And I have no doubt Mr. Bainbridge's check will keep my stock in excellent supply for the foreseeable future!"

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(Continued from other side)

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